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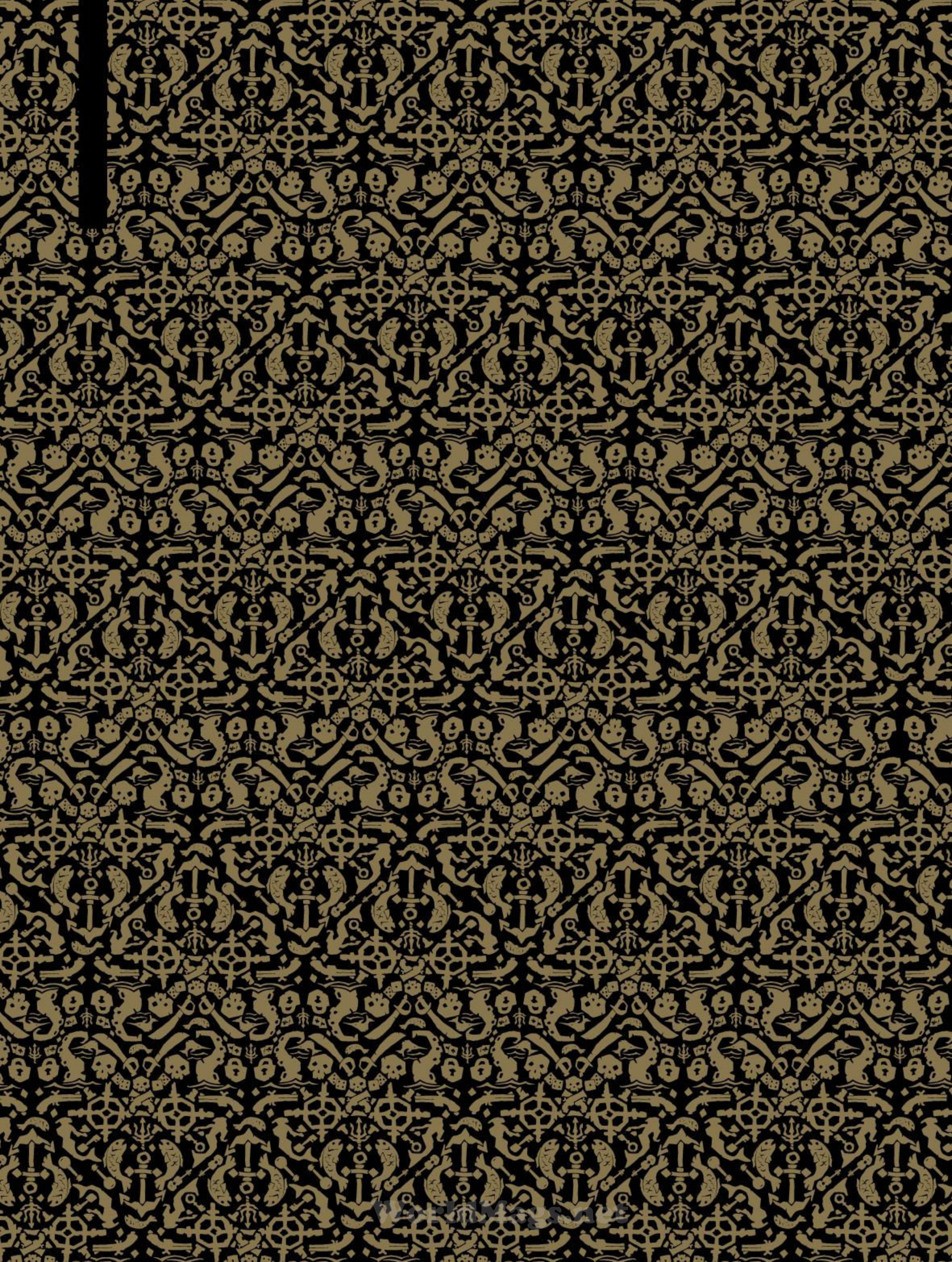
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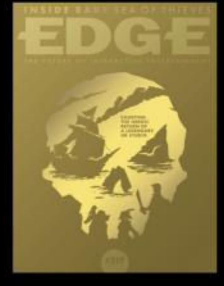
REVIEWED

YAKUZA 6
DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ
MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD
DANDARA

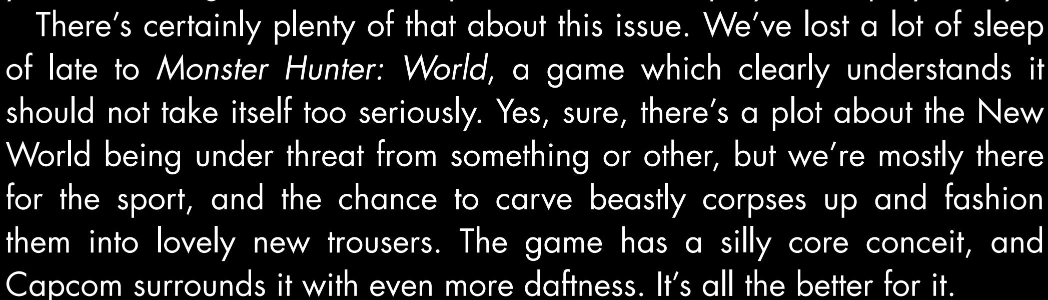


I was young and foolish then. I feel old and foolish now

Videogames are serious business these days, made by hundreds-strong teams to budgets well into the tens of millions. At the other end of the scale, indies remortgage their homes in order to make a dream a reality. In an era where weapon-balance changes, distasteful monetisation models, or slightly controversial opinions are seen in some corners as an excuse to wheel out the death threats, it's often hard to remember what got you into videogames in the first place. Games are play – and play is *silly*.



Exclusive subscriber edition

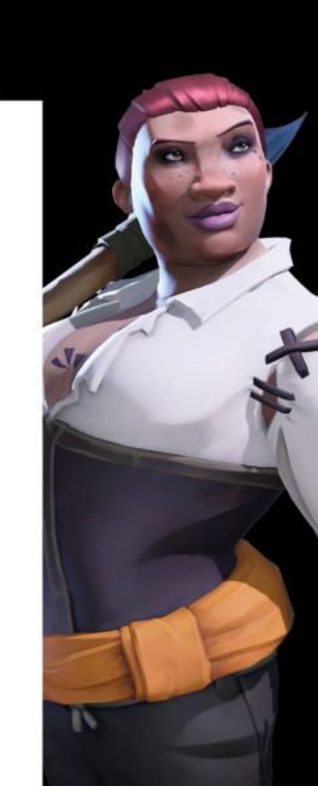


There's certainly plenty of that about this issue. We've lost a lot of sleep of late to *Monster Hunter: World*, a game which clearly understands it should not take itself too seriously. Yes, sure, there's a plot about the New World being under threat from something or other, but we're mostly there for the sport, and the chance to carve beastly corpses up and fashion them into lovely new trousers. The game has a silly core conceit, and Capcom surrounds it with even more daftness. It's all the better for it.

Meanwhile, not even the sight of Kazuma Kiryu walking off into the sunset can dampen *Yakuza 6*'s refusal to take itself too seriously. It's another tale of double- and triple-crosses in Tokyo's criminal underworld. But we cherish *Yakuza* for its balance of darkness and light; for its brutal violence, yes, but also its phone-sex parlours and cat cafes.

It's not all clown shoes this month, however. We hear of how indies are tiring of the App Store, how dedicated creators are struggling on YouTube, and investigate blockchain – which, despite the hype, sounds like it really could change everything forever, and soon.

But it's impossible to keep a straight face for long when you've got a Rare game on the cover. For over three decades, this UK legend has understood, as well as anyone, the benefits of being smart and daft at the same time. After too many years in the Kinect wilderness, it is finally back to doing what it has always done best – and its new game suggests it is nearing the peak of its powers. The *Sea Of Thieves* story begins on p54.



games



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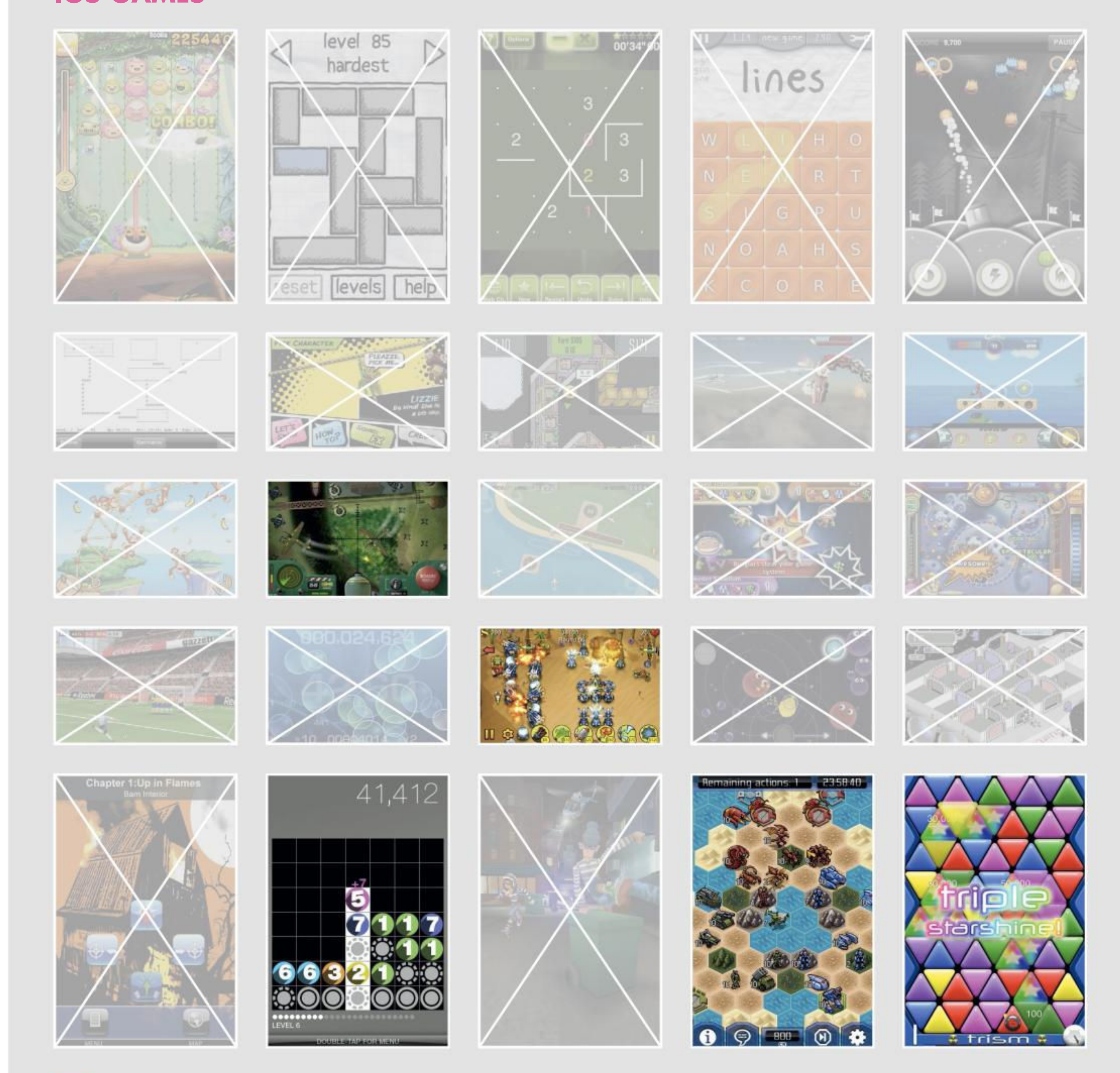
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If there are any conclusions to be drawn from the games that are still around from ten years ago it's that strategy games and puzzlers have longevity – though plenty of those have fallen, too

Core concerns

The App Store was once an indie developer's dream, but is making games on iOS now more effort than it's worth?









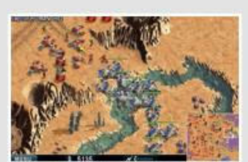


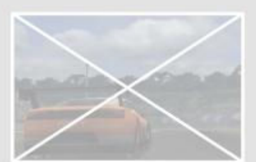








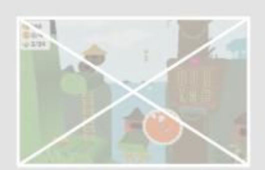




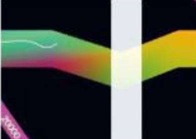
















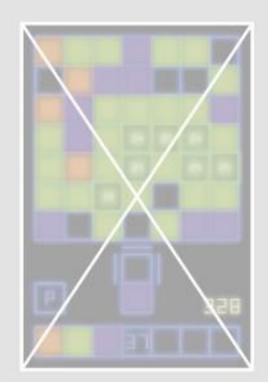


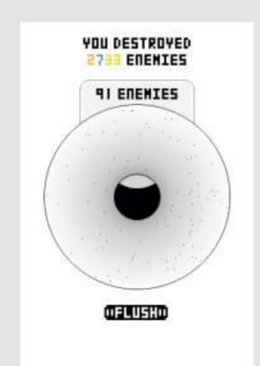












The App Store was never conceived with games in mind: its rise as a platform for independent game developers as well as app makers was a pleasant side-effect. As a marketplace it offered favourable conditions – a low yearly membership fee, and a 30 per cent cut of revenue being preferable to most publisher deals – and its accessibility meant anyone could follow their dream of making and self-publishing a game. Now, a few months away from its 10th anniversary, that dream seems increasingly out of reach for the small studios and bedroom coders upon whose shoulders its success was built.

The year 2017 was the second in a row without a new game from Simogo, one of **Edge**'s favourite iOS developers – and a studio that owes its existence to the App Store, as acknowledged in a blog post from creative figurehead **Simon Flesser**: "The iPhone has literally changed our lives!" But that was as positive as it got from Flesser, who conceded, with evident sadness, that maintaining its mobile catalogue has begun to take a toll. "This year," he wrote, "we spent a lot of time updating our old mobile games, to make them run properly on new OS versions, new resolutions, and whatever new things that were introduced which broke our games on iPhones and iPads around the world." ▶

As such, it's no real surprise to learn that the studio's next title, codenamed Project Night Road, will be a console game. It's not the first time Simogo has dabbled in other platforms: its second game, *Bumpy Road*, made it to PC and Mac, while folkloric chiller *Year Walk* was refitted for Steam before Dakko Dakko assisted the duo on a more substantial retooling for Wii U. But Simogo's eighth game will be its first not to be made primarily for iOS. For such a darling of the App Store – the format holder has been only too happy to benefit from its critical cachet, regularly featuring Simogo titles in store promotions – that's a pretty startling development.

Justifying the time investment on maintenance has become increasingly difficult, Flesser tells us, even for a studio so invested in ensuring that its games run optimally on every available device. Of Simogo's catalogue, only *Device 6* and, to a lesser extent, *Year Walk*, make the process financially worthwhile. "The other ones are just because we care," he tells us. "If we were to count what was really worth supporting, those games are not worth it, but we don't think like that. It would feel weird to have your work just go up in smoke."

Yet that's not an option for everyone. Gaming historian and documentarian Chris Chapman highlighted how widespread the problem is, in a recent tweet that referred to this very tome. Eight years ago, **Edge** highlighted the 50 best games on iPhone and iPod Touch, a celebration of some of the early App Store pioneers. Of those featured, only 10 can still be bought or downloaded today. It hasn't just affected small developers, either: early iOS hits *Flight Control* and *Bejeweled 2* were quietly removed in 2015 by EA, the publisher no longer willing to support or update the games for newer devices. Still, the impact was bigger on the little man: Otto-Ville Ojala, creator of knockabout multiplayer classics *Soccer Physics* and *Wrestle Jump*, delisted his entire catalogue last year after letting his developer membership expire, briefly giving his games away for free before they disappeared. His personal website temporarily offered builds for PC and Android so players could archive them, but those who've since updated their phones to iOS 11 can no longer play Ojala's games.

Shadi Muklashy is the creator of *Last Cannon*, one of the 40 lost games from that Top 50 list. "I grew up wanting to work on games," he tells us. "iOS was the first opportunity I had to completely self-publish any game creation I could dream up." *Last Cannon* certainly wasn't Muklashy's only success on the platform, but as he began to work full-time on new projects for other formats – including mech shooter *Hawken* and top-down multiplayer battler *Invisigun Heroes* – he found himself struggling to keep up with essential maintenance for his other games. Unable to continue supporting new devices, he took them down from the store, rather than leaving them up but unplayable for some. "I don't like having partially-broken apps representing me in the wild," he says, though he concedes that, but not for the annual developer fee, he may have left the apps up so those with older devices could still play them. *Last Cannon* and *Backwords* may still have been earning enough to cover the cost, but for "a dinner or two per month", Muklashy reckoned it wasn't worth the ever-increasing effort on his part.

"The amount of work you have to put in in the long term is so much higher than for console games"

The technical challenges of keeping old games updated differ between developers. Muklashy had developed his early games using Xcode, Apple's integrated development environment, and updating them to the much newer versions would have required significant work. His other big problem was more universal: "The increasing number of devices also made it harder to physically test all my changes and verify their functionality." In that regard, he says, Apple has lost one of its competitive advantages to Android. "Hardware compatibility-wise, it's still probably infinitely better, but I guess it's inevitable that with time it would become more and more difficult."



Screen-resolution changes have required significant reconstruction work on *Device 6*

This is an issue that's proving steadily more demanding for a developer like Simogo, which has seven games to consider each time Apple updates its hardware or software. It hasn't helped that its games are 2D, since changing aspect ratios can have a much bigger impact, as Flesser explains. "Many 2D games are specifically designed so you know what the player can see on the screen: imagine playing something like a 2D platformer, where suddenly a platform becomes visible that was not meant to be seen," he says. "And because 2D art is often made to look nice in a specific resolution, it tends to look jaggy when downscaled or blurry when upscaled."

That's not an issue for those who make games in 3D, which can be scaled more easily. New resolutions and ratios haven't really been a problem for Fireproof Games' popular *The Room* series. "Our games are pretty good at adapting for those," says studio director **Barry Meade**. "The iPhone X presented some slightly different problems with the notch, but Apple did a good job of making sure that didn't break old games." Indeed, it has a trick up its sleeve as far as future-proofing goes. "Each game connects to our servers when it first boots

The Room series shows the benefit of scaling projects to suit the mobile market: the games may look expensive, but they're relatively compact

up and downloads a settings file which tells it what resolution and graphics settings it should use for the device it's running on," the studio's tech lead **Rob Dodd** elaborates. "If new devices are released or something changes in the OS that affects performance, we can tweak those settings on the fly without releasing an update." Clever stuff.

Then again, OS updates can be something of a lottery. "Generally, they cause us no work other than grabbing the beta ahead of release to check everything's fine, but occasionally there's one that causes us a lot of work," Dodd tells us. "One example was Apple's 64-bit update. To support 64-bit devices natively we had to upgrade to a very recent version of Unity. *The Room* was around four years old at the time, so that was a time-consuming process." Its sequel, a mere two years old, was a much simpler proposition. Even so, ensuring all of its apps had 64-bit support represented about a month of work for Fireproof: a not-insignificant amount of time for a small team.

Not many have the resources to take that hit, of course, and with the costs likely to outweigh the benefits for smaller studios, Meade imagines that some will inevitably begin to move away. Any sort of exodus, he says, would be a tragedy in the digital age. "Simply updating something to keep working on a platform can take weeks of dev time and testing, so if your margins are pretty tight, which is true for so many developers, you lose the economic case to maintain your games," he says. "Where previously upkeep was just an occasional bother, you now have to factor OS changes into your business model." In one sense, he suggests, this isn't anything new for an industry where the inexorable march of technology regularly renders old hardware obsolete. "But what has changed is that we now have thousands of small developers making a slim living off a market that previously couldn't support them. So with every major update a few more games hit the wall."

Flesser suggests it needn't be that way; if OS updates were built with backwards compatibility in mind, theoretically nothing would have to be done with old games to keep them functional. "Look at something like Windows, which has insanely good backwards compatibility," he says. Still, he has some sympathy for Apple, which is under pressure from its own users to produce new hardware and software updates, and thus has to make compromises somewhere. "It's probably mostly to do with priorities, and it just doesn't seem that backwards compatibility – or *efficient* backwards compatibility – is high on that list for Apple."

Is there still, we wonder, a way to thrive on mobile? If anyone's well-placed to offer advice, it would seem to be Meade, given the popularity of *The Room* and its sequels. But he's well aware that there's no such thing as a sure thing on this platform. "Success comes down to volatile factors like history and circumstance, as well as other squishy, uncomfortable subjects such as taste," he says. "I mean, *The Room* won Apple's iPad Game Of The Year 2012 – I wouldn't advise anyone to build a business plan around that." Flesser, meanwhile, believes that the barrier to entry is still much lower than on consoles, but there are dark clouds on the iOS horizon. "The amount of work you have to put in in the long term is so much higher than for console games," he says. "If you're a studio like us that is constantly wanting to do something new, it's becoming harder to justify mobile than it was a few years back."

There lies the crux of the matter. A platform that was once, in Muklashy's words, "extremely liberating and revolutionary" now seems restrictive and no longer cost-effective for many small teams. Meanwhile, as indie studios look elsewhere to sell their games – the rush to Switch and Steam will bring its own problems, of course – more and more mobile classics are being lost to the digital ether. Though its free-to-play market may be thriving, the App Store will celebrate a decade of business having alienated many of the same developers that first carried it to prominence. ■





Simogo's Simon Flesser (top) and Fireproof's Barry Meade

Speed dating

How a background in speedrunning helped create cult hit Doki Doki Literature Club

Dan Salvato is the creator of *Doki Doki Literature Club*. The innocuous-seeming, free-to-play visual novel took the internet by storm last year with its devious manipulation of anime clichés and players alike. Salvato, previously best known among the speedrunning community, has now been thrust into a mainstream spotlight. Here, we discuss *DDLC*'s success, and how his niche interests have shaped his outlook, and output, as a game developer.

How did you get into speedrunning?
In college. I think speedrunning comes from a desire to get the absolute most out of a game that you love, that you've probably already beaten a thousand times. I saw a video on Ebaumsworld of someone beating *Super Mario Brothers 3* in 11 minutes, and all these *Super Mario 64* speedruns. And I got involved with the *Super Smash Bros Melee* community, which introduced me to Twitch. I thought about finding one of my favourite games that I could speedrun. But I never really took the plunge until I was putting off studying for finals one night, and decided that it would probably be a good time to sink hundreds of hours into a new hobby.

> "If I ever wanted to have any hope of non-anime fans playing Doki Doki Literature Club, it had to be free"

How did that lead to a modding career?
I started creating training tools and things for running *Melee* tournaments. That's where it took off, and that grew until I put out 20XX Tournament Edition. After one Games Done Quick, I got into watching *Super Mario Sunshine* runs, and realised it didn't have the tools for practising that *Mario 64* and *Ocarina* did. I made a level select, then a code where you could save and load Mario's position to practise certain sequences. I just put them out there, and forgot about it. I had no idea about the impact it had on the community until it was brought up at this year's AGDQ, and I was mentioned in a recent video on the progression of the record. I'm like, "What the heck?" [laughs]

That brings us to *Doki Doki Literature Club*. Did its success surprise you?
I hoped that it would get big, but the amount of big that it got surpassed that by, like, a factor of 20. I figured it had a chance of blowing up, based on what I knew about the audience and it being that type of game that spreads by word of mouth – you want to tell people to play it, despite them not wanting to because it just looks like a cute romance game. I really admire visual novels as a type of writing, as well as from a game-design perspective. But in the west, they're very niche: if mainstream gamers look at a visual novel, the first thing they see is anime.

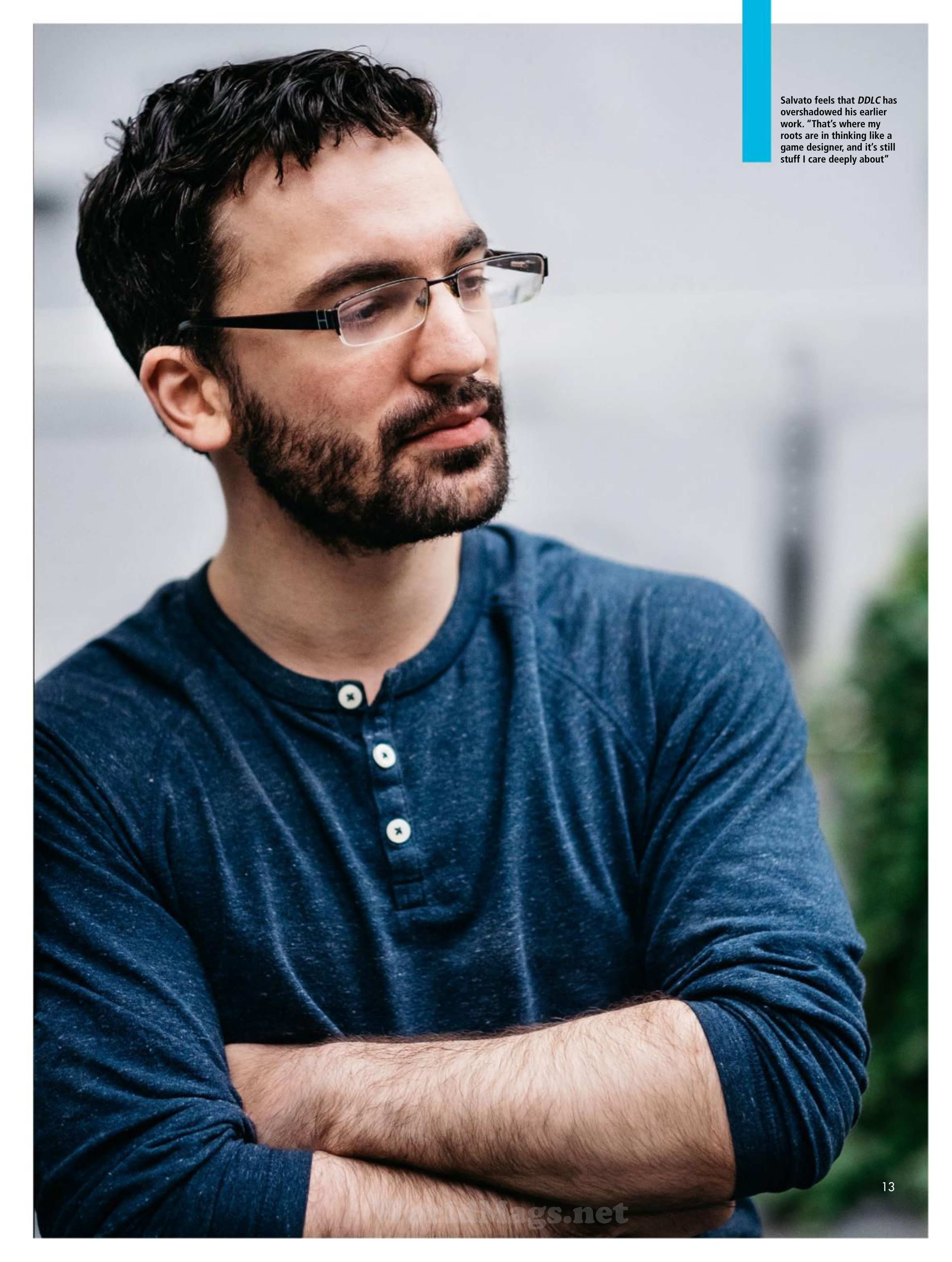
Why make it free to play?
If I ever wanted to have any hope of non-anime fans playing it, it had to be free. One half of my audience is people who love anime. The other half is people who like to make fun of it, and the game invites them to do that – and later kind of slaps them in the face, like, "You're taking this game seriously now." Another thing that crossed my mind was, "Can I charge people for a game that they're ultimately not getting?" Some would be looking for a cute game, and end up highly disturbed. I couldn't bear the thought of them paying for it and getting something horrible in return. *DDLC* wasn't about money: I wanted to make the statements that I wanted to with the game, and give myself credibility as a developer, so that people would maybe pay attention to other visual novels I make in future.



Do you ever regret that decision?
What are the chances it would have gotten this big if it cost anything? Zero. Even a price barrier of five dollars would have prevented so many from playing it: streamers, non-anime fans. That's the reason that I can't have any regrets.

Are you now feeling the pressure when it comes to your next game?
I couldn't help but think that this might be the most popular thing I ever do, that people will be disappointed by my next project. But from a rational standpoint, for my entire career, I've been someone who does the things that I want to do, to reach the people I want to reach. Sometimes that's going to be a large audience; sometimes that's going to be a smaller audience. As long as I'm passionate about what I do, and the people I want to reach enjoy it, that's all I can ask.

It seems like your speedrunning experience influenced your dev style.
Definitely. Everyone has that experience of games, books, movies, whatever – you love it so much you watch it, or play it, or read it again, and notice details you didn't before. You read theories online, and learn about things you missed. That's something I've always thoroughly enjoyed – getting more out of the things you love. I wanted to enable that for *DDLC* players, and that was inspired by experiences I've had with games in my past. ■



Salvato feels that *DDLC* has overshadowed his earlier work. “That’s where my roots are in thinking like a game designer, and it’s still stuff I care deeply about”

Darkness zone

Making nuanced, insightful videos on YouTube is already hard enough. What happens when the game you love starts to die?

Conventional wisdom has it that, if you want to stand out in a crowded field, you need to specialise. That's certainly proven true in the Wild Wests of YouTube and Twitch, where passionate players of games can turn their skills into a career. Yet with both platforms still in their relative infancy, any consensus on how to find success on them runs the risk of being proven wrong. What if, for instance, the game on which you've built a business and a living goes horribly awry?

That's a problem that **Stefan 'Datto' Jonke** is currently coming to terms with. Across YouTube and Twitch, Jonke spent the first three years of *Destiny*'s life establishing himself as one of the game's deepest community thinkers. While others cut flashy thumbskill montages or rounded up the latest news, Jonke's USP was the way he broke the game down, identifying, analysing and explaining how Bungie's often inscrutable game really worked. If you wanted to optimise your team's DPS for a raid boss, to know which loadouts were most effective for a given week's Nightfall strike, or to find out if the exotic chestpiece that just dropped for you was any good, Datto's channel was your first port of call.

Destiny 2, however, is a much simpler game. It is also, after a string of headline controversies, orders of magnitude less popular. Indeed, it is widely hated – and that, naturally, has impacted Jonke's living. "I was *very* unprepared for how *Destiny 2* turned out," he tells us. So were many others. Where the first game's subclass menu led to hundreds of possible builds, *Destiny 2* offers just two. Where the original's loot came with randomised perks, *Destiny 2*'s are fixed. Suddenly, Jonke found, there wasn't much need for him. "Everything is so homogenised, so pushed towards the middle, that everything's good to a degree. I don't think that's a terrible thing, but it's also not great for YouTube. It kinda feels like they took anything that I could have made into a YouTube video and, basically, just removed it from the game. Which I understand; you don't want people to *have* to go to the Internet to learn how to play their character. It's noble, but it kinda puts me out of a job [laughs]."

> Jonke is so rooted in Destiny that anything else he tries to move into will involve a long climb

Jonke's position is, if not perilous, then certainly precarious; he's so rooted in *Destiny* that anything else he tries to move into will involve a long climb. When we speak, he's just come off a heavy weekend of *Monster Hunter: World*. It's a game which would seem to suit his mathematical approach, but which already has an established YouTube community. Other potential avenues – *Warframe*, perhaps, or Ubisoft's much-improved *The Division* – are closed off for similar reasons. "I'd love to talk about *Monster Hunter*, but I've played 25 hours of that game and I still feel like I know absolutely nothing about it. Becoming an expert takes hundreds, if not thousands, of hours, and during that time I can't really make any videos because people expect a certain level of play from me. If I'm not providing that – or if I get something wrong – that's not going to look good."

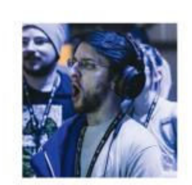
Yet this is not just a story of *Destiny 2*, and what happens when a game changes. It's what happens to that game's community, and the tone of conversation, and how video producers and streamers can find themselves caught in the middle between a development studio and an angry community. *Destiny 2* has slumped on Twitch, and while much of that is due to the game being a markedly less engaging spectator sport, it's also because the streamers themselves are fed up with the flood of viewer negativity. "Everyone's sick of their chats just being a huge bummer," Jonke says. "We can only listen to it so many times: 'Datto, please talk about how much *Destiny 2* sucks. Here's some money'."

So, where now? Jonke has earned a comfortable enough living – and lived a boring enough life, chained as he is to his editing suite – to survive a fallow period, and has been through this before to an extent, with interest in *Destiny* naturally tailing off in the droughts between expansion releases. He points to the *Call Of Duty* YouTuber Drift0r, who abandoned the series for a year because of his distaste for 2016's *Infinite Warfare*, and today has 1.3 million subscribers.

Yet Jonke is also having to reevaluate, on the fly, what he thought was going to be, at least by YouTube standards, a long career. And for the rest of us, it poses a troubling question. What happens to YouTube when the sort of deep, insightful, narrowly focused work in which Jonke specialises no longer looks like a valid career option? Jonke, to his credit, intends to keep plugging away. "I don't have a post-YouTube plan right now, because I didn't think I was going to need one so early. That's on me – it's not Bungie's job to make sure I have a job. But I don't feel like I'm ready to go yet. I want to go out on my own terms. If I can hang on a little bit longer – if I have to burn through some savings to get through the hard part – I'll do it. I don't want to be done just yet." ■

VENDOR MACHINE

While Bungie doesn't share *Destiny 2*'s player numbers, some fuzzy metrics do exist: its position on Twitch, for example, or the population of the weekly Trials Of Osiris PVP event. Jonke has one of his own. Since early in *Destiny*'s life, he has made a video every week, running down the location and inventory of Xur, a merchant who, every Friday, offers a random selection of exotic gear. "I have this number I call The Xur Index, where you can tell how healthy the game is at any point by looking at the viewer numbers of my videos. They're pointless – it's just a tradition that I've had for so long – but now we've reached the point where it's not even worth doing them anymore." He made his final Xur video on January 22, three years and three months into *Destiny*'s planned ten-year life.



Stefan 'Datto' Jonke, pictured at last year's *Destiny 2* reveal event



This icon, which greeted a team wipe in the first *Destiny*, has been a much rarer sight in the sequel. Bungie is working at making the game more challenging, however, as well as more rewarding



Feral Cat Den's background is in web interactive and motion graphic animation, Anthony tells us, and is "a fan of studios like Buck, Giant Ant and Golden Wolf – their animations combine clever transitions, metaphorical imagery, and abstracted design"



COSMIC LOVE

How film noir influences and a classic tale of romance grants the surreal Genesis Noir its universal appeal

What if the Big Bang was a gunshot, hurtling towards the heart of your amour? Point-and-click adventure *Genesis Noir* casts you as a lovestruck gumshoe out to unravel creation itself. His investigation is sketched in minimalist monochrome. "Simple graphic drawings enable us to combine 2D and 3D assets, and suit the black-and-white look of film noir," Feral Cat Den's creative lead **Evan Anthony** tells us. Italo Calvino's Cosmicomics, and the works of Marc-Antoine Michel, have also guided design: "We're attempting to utilise the kinds of layout and unreal space you might find in graphic novels to create interesting interactive environments."

Generative art lets players leave their mark on the cosmos. "When you think about game developers building dynamic systems, you typically think of procedurally generated worlds: giant mountains, infinite fields," the game's lead programmer **Jeremy Abel** says. "We're looking at it on a much smaller scale." Planting gardens, using an old rotary phone, or manipulating kaleidoscopic patterns are all designed to "feel like opening a new toy, rather than trying to solve a really difficult puzzle," Abel says.

At the centre of everything, however, is that simple love story. "Calvino writes of characters that transcend space and time, yet have the same emotions as us on Earth," says Anthony. "Our goal is to translate the poetry and humanism found in Cosmicomics into interactive experiences. We've been intentional in using classic film noir to orient the player in an elusive setting: starting with familiar things lets us get weirder in other areas." Expect to be enraptured on PC and Mac next year. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"This is an amazing company. One which routinely **delivers epic experiences** for our fans on a scale that no one else can."

Outgoing Activision Publishing CEO **Eric Hirshberg** conveniently overlooks *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5*. Some of those glitches were pretty epic, we suppose



"It is unacceptable to be **targeting our children** with predatory gambling masked in a game with dancing bunnies or something."

Washington state senator **Kevin Ranker** becomes the latest political voice in the dancing-bunny scandal rocking videogames



"If my personal actions or the actions of anyone who ever worked with me **offended or caused pain** to anyone at our companies, then I apologise without reservation."

Nolan Bushnell takes it on the chin following allegations of misconduct in his Atari days

"Once I heard that people were talking so much about **Mario's belly button**, it made me start to think about whether we should revisit the topic on the design side."



Community engagement's one thing, *Super Mario Odyssey* executive producer **Yoshiaki Koizumi**, but seriously, stay away from DeviantArt

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game The House Of The Dead: Scarlet Dawn
Manufacturer Sega

The ground floor of a Japanese game centre may traditionally be given over to UFO Catcher games, but every so often a game comes along that's as sure a crowd-puller as any tantalising pile of out-of-reach plushies. *The House Of The Dead* is one such game, a ground-floor showpiece that's finally returning to arcades after a recent round of location tests in Tokyo.

Remarkably, it's the first *House Of The Dead* game built for the arcade in 13 years; heck, it's been nine years since the series' last outing, the Wii Remote-powered *Overkill*. Things have moved on a lot since then, of course.

Obviously, there are more zombies now. While the action starts out gently enough you're soon facing off against a horde that moves at speed, the game briefly giving you a borrow of a grenade launcher to thin out the numbers. Set-pieces are naturally more explosive than before; a collapsing ceiling now tumbles to the ground with licks of flame and showers of sparks. It's not the prettiest game you'll see this year by any means, but in the context of its series, it's quite the step up.

In one respect, anyway. Voice acting is so hammy you'll find yourself reaching for the eggs, and while arcade hardware may have come a long way during the series' hiatus, the tenets of the zombie lightgun shooter are inescapable. Still, that's precisely the point. This is a game to draw a crowd, a centrepiece for the game-centre owner and a performance piece for the player, a salaryman's lunch break immaculately spoiled. It's good to have it back, warts and all.





My Favourite Game
Dave White

The pop-culture artist on bus-stop brawling, arcade stardom and the game that almost made him go bald

Dave White is a Liverpudlian artist who has been hailed as "the UK's Andy Warhol". A key player in the 'sneaker art' movement of the early 2000s, his work has led to several collaborations with Nike, including the release of his own version of the classic Air Max 95. Currently based in Dorset, his rural environs have sparked a recent professional interest in wildlife – but as a visit to his studio reveals, there's still plenty of time for games out in the sticks.

What's your earliest gaming memory?
I was seven years old, in Southport, where there was a skatepark that I would go to every day in the summer holidays. This guy rolled up with a big box on wheels, unwrapped it, all these crazy alien graphics on the side – *Space Invaders*. I'd never seen anything like it before. He plugged it in, and that was it. That was me done.

This was before games were available in the home. You had to go out and find them, right?
Arcades started to open – The Golden Goose in Southport, Las Vegas in Liverpool. I got a pound a week in pocket money, and we'd go out on Saturday mornings. I would play *Tron*; it's one of my favourite arcade games of all time, I can still remember a lot of the patterns for the light cycles.

You've always been into fighting games. How did you get into them?
When I graduated from university, I bought a Greyhound bus ticket from New York to California. *Street Fighter II* had recently launched, and every Greyhound station had this machine with huge queues of people waiting to play. It was like nothing that had come before; it became an obsession, and I've never really lost it. I've been playing it since the start, and it's absolutely my favourite game in the universe.

LOST SECTORS
While White has held a deep interest in games for almost his entire life, he's largely stayed away from them in his work. There was a commission for Capcom at the launch of *Street Fighter IV*, but by and large White keeps hobby and work separate. Yet he does have ideas. "I think often of servers being turned off on games," he says. "All these environments – Dust2 in *CS:GO*, Crash in *COD4*, things like that – when you can't play the games anymore, you'll still be able to recall every doorway, every sightline, in photorealistic detail. I think it might be interesting to paint them, so once the games are gone, these places live on."



We normally save that until later, but okay – which one in particular is your favourite?
Super Street Fighter II X [*Super SFII Turbo* in the west], because it's almost like chess. The rules were all set, but each character was given a couple more moves. You knew the designers put these things in, not to be flashy, but to elevate people's skills. I loved that.

Do you play the more modern *Street Fighter* games, too?
I think *Street Fighter IV* was an absolutely perfect re-ignition of the series; anyone who could play *SFII* at a fun level could pick that game up and play it. I think *Street Fighter V* is atrocious.

That, we assume, is why you have a *Super SFII X* cabinet in your studio, rather than an *SFV* one.
Yeah. The materials I use need a certain time to dry – sometimes an hour, or half an hour, or 20 minutes. Rather than literally watching paint dry, I come through and have a quick run through. That's something that's been a ritual for me for as long as I can remember.

Is there a reason you don't keep consoles in here?
(laughs) Yeah. If I come in here and I've got *COD: WWII*, or *Destiny 2* or anything I'm currently involved in, it's going to change my mindset.

If *Street Fighter V* isn't doing it for you, what are you playing at the moment?
Games really have to be something special to hold my attention. We all have our piles of shame, but I'm much more selective now. *Dark Souls*, as much as I nearly went completely bald with it, I've never found a game like it – that makes everything look rubbish. I'm playing *Assassin's Creed Origins*, and it looks phenomenal in HDR. It's immersive, but I couldn't play it all day, it'd do my head in. I play *PUBG*, too, but can only manage two games before the stress gets too much. They've got to be good games that keep me immersed; if they're not fun then cheers, off you pop.

> "I play PUBG, but can only manage two games before the stress gets too much"

So despite your profession, you're not solely drawn to games where art is a focus? *PUBG*, for all its merits, isn't exactly a looker.
If a game looks beautiful, that's a bonus. To be immersed in a beautiful skybox, or a sunset, or a 24-hour cycle in *GTAV*; I love that, but it's not the be-all and end-all. It's about how the whole thing works, which still blows my mind. You take it for granted; you put a disc in, pick up a pad, and you're driving around Los Angeles. It's bizarre, and I love it. ■

White loves fighting games, but has less time for those built on long, frame-perfect combo strings. "I'm 47, and going through combo trials, you get to the last one and you've got to be an octopus on PCP to pull it off"



WEBSITE
The Videogame Soda Machine Project
bit.ly/vgsoda

Jess Morrissette must be thirsty. The Political Science professor and amateur game developer has taken it upon himself to document every known case of a soda machine appearing in a videogame. There are close to 1,700 examples on his regularly updated blog, from the infamous Nuka-Cola outfits native to the *Fallout* series (including vending machine assets from the cancelled Van Buren project) to drink distributors to the less obvious *Outlast* and Virtual Boy game *Nester's Funky Bowling*. It's a wonderfully useless effort, with fans sending in snaps too. If you're oddly fascinated by this sort of thing, there are links to similar blogs on the 'About' page, a little below a curious admission from Morrissette: not one of his games features a soda machine.





VIDEO
Shadow Of The Colossus – Boundary Break
bit.ly/sotcbreak

With the recent release of Bluepoint's PS4 remaster, it's the perfect time for YouTuber Shesez to dig into Team Ico's original PS2 adventure. The Boundary Break series charts his discoveries as he uses free cameras in emulators to uncover the visual trickery in videogame levels. *Shadow Of The Colossus* uses some deliciously odd devices, including hiding colossi under the world before they appear in the game, and a spooky countermeasure to Peeping Toms. Zoomed-out angles on certain fights further illuminate the game's breathtaking sense of scale.

WEB GAME
The World Begins With You
bit.ly/worldbegins

Despite the title, this is not the unofficial prequel to Square Enix's celebrated ARPG. The vibe of Fabian Denter's bewitching puzzle platformer couldn't be more different, hauntingly scored in shivering synths and suffused with magical light. Its young, caped protagonist and mysterious setting recalls Tequila Works' *Rime*, as you stumble and hop across rocky pillars or push through gigantic mazes. At other times, Playdead's *Inside* comes to mind: one sequence involving an escape on a boat leads to some disturbing deaths, our hero crumpling under the gaze of deadly turrets. The short story is more suggestive than satisfying, the platforming is floaty and wayward, and poor signposting throughout can frustrate – but this solo game jam project has an elegance that often takes larger teams years to achieve.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

HARDWARE
Super Nt
bit.ly/supernt

Seattle firm Analogue is fast carving out a niche as a designer of luscious reimaginings of classic gaming hardware – and better yet, it's learned to control costs since the release of its $450 NES, the Nt. Clocking in at a comparatively reasonable $189, the Super Nt plays original SNES cartridges in 1080p using a field-programmable gate array chip containing reverse-engineered SNES circuitry. That means that games play natively, rather than through emulation, with zero input lag added along the way. There are trade-offs, particularly for retro purists; while the Nt had analogue and digital outputs, this only has HDMI. An adaptor for CRT users is, at least, in the works. Finally, some justification for still having that *Hat-Trick Hero* cart we've somehow never been able to bring ourselves to part with.



continue

Crate strides
EA's *Battlefront II* patch improves progression, buffing payouts

Scarlett fever
Sasha Hostyn makes *StarCraft* history as the first woman to win a major

Burning passion
Inspired by *Firewatch*, a US teenager becomes a fire-tower historian

Man or beast
Monster Hunter: World's creatures were mocapped by actual, flailing humans

quit

Hard pass
Indie retailer Gameware refuses to stock Xboxes after Game Pass update

Stone dead
Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite misses Evo – and the Pro Tour. Sheesh

Skies the limit
Failbetter layoffs follow slow *Sunless Skies* sales. Our best to all affected

Any port
Crash Bandicoot N.Sane Trilogy hits Switch and PC this year. Please, stop



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TWEETS

Home automation apocalypse: Alexa has begun understanding my 3 yr old. "Alexa, turn up the temperature in the living room." "Alexa, order more peanut butter." "Alexa, play Justin Bieber." All are basically domestic equivalents of nuclear launch orders
Mark Noseworthy @knowsworthy
Executive producer, *Destiny 2*

Hmm, both Bitcoin and Dow Jones plunging? Good thing I put all my money into the safest investment: developing an independent videogame
Johnnemann Nordhagen @johnnemann
Creator, *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine*

I'm hitting the road for a week starting tomorrow, so I'm making sure that every time I go back to the base in *Monster Hunter* I carry Poogie to the sunny spot on the carpet by all the plants because I'm a god damned twelve year old that's overly invested in digital animals
Zoë Quinn @UnburntWitch
Co-founder, Crash Override Network



DISPATCHES APRIL



Issue 316

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Song to the cynic

It seems that the next franchise that Nintendo is bringing to smartphones is *Mario Kart*, one of the greatest multiplayer racing games of all time. I don't blame Nintendo for making the transition to mobile phone gaming; I'm sure it will be financially rewarding for them, and allow an untapped market to realise the brilliance of all-things Nintendo.

However I won't be downloading the *Mario Kart* app when it's released, because I've just never really been a mobile phone gamer. Videogames have been a part of my life since the ZX Spectrum days, but it just doesn't appeal to me to play a videogame on my phone. Even beloved Nintendo can't sway my opinion on that, unless they can provide a truly original slant on an existing IP that offers something different to home console iterations. (Or failing that, a new 2D smartphone-exclusive *Metroid* might win me over.)

I'm sure I'm in the minority, and I can understand the convenience of playing on mobile to pass away idle time, but there's two reasons why it isn't for me. Firstly, my mobile phone battery is meagre on longevity, without a videogame speeding up its drainage. As it is, my smartphone has to be charged every night, to avoid the following day becoming the tense challenge of surviving a day with only 21 per cent battery, or something.

But secondly (and perhaps slightly irrationally) there's the impurity of playing a game on something that's not a dedicated games machine. If I'm wanting to play a game beyond the confines of the four walls of my home, then my PS Vita or my new Nintendo Switch fulfils the task. Or if I want something smaller to manage, my Gameboy Micro does the job magnificently.

I'd be interested to know what percentage of regular smartphone gamers are people who tend to only play on their mobile (and perhaps don't own a home console), as opposed to those that are 'hardcore' players at home and still invest plenty of time in mobile gaming.

For those of you that are new to Nintendo, and do opt to install the *Mario Kart* app, prepare to live in fear of battery drainage and blue shells.

Ben Bulbeck

Well, *Mario Kart Tour* isn't exactly being developed with the multiformat player in mind. If, as Nintendo hopes, it introduces more people to one of the greatest game makers of all, we're absolutely fine with it.

"I was shocked at how extreme the price drop was on games that weren't exactly old"

Hang on

Recently I discovered the subreddit Patient Gamers. The idea is to reject preorders, day-one buying and, hell, even current-year buying of games in favour of playing the hits a few years behind, and boy can it save you a lot of money. As well as picking up older indie hits on the cheap, I find myself getting triple-A games at ridiculously marked-down prices – *Prey* is going for £15, for example. That's not even mentioning more casual, annual releases which are frankly being given away – 50p for *FIFA 16*! This isn't a new idea, of course – prices for games have always gone down over time. I was, however, shocked at just how extreme the price drop was on games that weren't exactly old, though. In a world where we're repeatedly told how triple-A games are too expensive to make, said drops surely aren't the sign of a stable and healthy industry.

One bad year for, say, Activision, with *Destiny 2*'s coming September expansion or the new *Call Of Duty*, could put them in very real trouble, with little chance of redemption due to price drops down the line. A scenario like this is arguably what did THQ in.

A climate where such damage can be done



in an opening week or month of a game creates a culture of risk aversion, and that's not good if we want more *Nier*s or *Zelda*s this year. The movie industry has a very similar problem at the moment. Triple-A publishers, then, should be putting their eggs in more than one basket and rejecting this 'all or nothing' culture.
Aaron Syposz

THQ's problem was that it was overexposed in too many ways; it makes the Activision way look sensible. Patient Gamers sounds great – especially if it means we get to review *Puzzle & Dragons* again next month.

About you

Issue 316 was yet again a fine addition to my bookcase: a blistering yet correct criticism of *Soulcalibur VI*, an in-depth look at *A Way Out*, whose multiplayer has me truly hyped, and a praiseworthy Post Script to *OK KO!* on its fantastic combat system.

Oh, and there's ten pages dedicated to pushing buttons in original, artistic ways. Yay for originality in games, right? Yay for news media taking a look at the fringes of the industry, no? Yay for playing *Pepsiman* with Pespi cans… but actually, ugh, aren't we done with this kind of thing? The Power Glove was bad. *DDR* and *Guitar Hero* were fads. And the likes of EyeToy, the Wiimote, and Kinect make me want to hurl.

I can't help thinking that the medium is only as good as our ability to communicate with their CPUs. I am extremely happy with the language we have developed pushing buttons on joypads, keyboards, and mice. Not having to think about what I'm doing physically helps me focus on what I'm doing mentally. And I honestly don't feel like learning new languages.

And yet I am so happy you printed that article. The horrible truth is that I, and likely most other players, have become inveterated. We're sticks in the mud, and we need a kick up the backside. The first time I skimmed through the article, I felt disdain, ranting in my mind: 'These millennial beatniks are wasting their time – go play some *Super Metroid*.' But reading it thoroughly, taking in its optimism and glee, I felt a sense of excitement about the medium I hadn't felt for a while. The future of interactive entertainment? Only time will tell. But for now, this is the kind of thing I should be reading about, even if involves those silly fidget spinners.
Robert August de Meijer

Yes, we're sorry about the fidget spinners. What quickened our pulse about the people in Pushing Buttons was that, unlike a Kinect or Wii Remote, they're nothing to do with business objectives, but the simple fun of it.

Everything flows

Earlier in January, Sony quietly announced its entry into the figurine market with the Totaku series, and the Internet quickly condemned these models for lacking any form of in-game functionality like their toys-to-life peers. However, this is the same Internet that is up in arms over Amiibo locking content behind scarce and expensive NFC chips, so Sony never really stood a chance. In my opinion, this posturing over gaming figurines (which is one sentence I never thought I'd type) has nothing to do with actual functionality, and entirely to do with the average gamer's internal conflict on spending extortionate amounts of money on, essentially, toys. Don't get me wrong – things such as *Metroid: Samus Returns* locking a harder difficulty mode behind an Amiibo was particularly crafty, especially towards long-time fans of the series.

However, like the hypocrite I am, I didn't even end up taking time to unlock the Fusion difficulty setting when I was lucky enough to acquire the figurine. Instead, I found far more satisfaction in placing Baby Metroid proudly on my Amiibo shelf, the result of a terrifying, clandestine inter-species relationship between Wedding Bowser and Link. Ultimately, NFC chip or not, the only significant content that these figurines hide from us are the games we could have bought in their place. Until I can see Heihachi and Ganondorf square off on the Switch, I'm happy with this compromise.
Rob Funnell

If your point is that the Internet is a terrible place then yes, welcome to the party. Print's pretty great though, isn't it?

Mellow doubt

There has been a lot of hand-wringing over the welfare of the animals in *Monster Hunter: World*. Players hunt gigantic lizards mercilessly for their scales, meat, bones and whatever else they can carve off. Some people may think this is asinine in an industry where violence is usually the rule rather than the exception. I would say that we are not questioning violence in gaming enough.

Of course, gameplay needs to be engaging, challenging and fun, and usually that will be a result of facing off against a conflict. Often, there is a suspension of guilt. The enemies being shot to pieces are the bad guys, and they are meant to be killed. Maybe they are mindless zombies. Maybe they are towering beasts. Their purpose is to expire.

When these enemies are given some personality and character, ethical questions can be brought to the forefront in a way that's far more impactful. Games like *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* manage to wield this in a way that benefits the story far more than a simple quest to kill all of the dudes.

It's probable that the moral dilemma presented by *MH:W* is a by-product that is entirely accidental, but it is also relevant. At what point do we start caring about what we're asked to do? Should we care at all?
Matt Edwards

Not when you can make such pretty clothes out of them, no, sorry. Enjoy your new PS Plus sub, and let us know if you're up for farming up an HR Radobaan set. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

A sign of the conservative nature of the videogame industry is that the most exciting announcement in ages was that of Nintendo Labo. Going back to its roots as a manufacturer of playing cards, Nintendo unveiled a set of cardboard-and-string peripheral kits for the Switch that turn the console into a tiny honky-tonk piano, an extendable fishing rod, a remote-controlled car, and even a kind of exoskeleton for controlling an in-game giant robot.

There is more fun new thinking here, evidently, than in scores of brown-and-green thirdperson climbing-and-face-shooting simulators. Shares in Nintendo soared by $1.4 billion on the announcement. Some commentators looked askance at the prices of the kits (£60 to £70), and wondered exactly how long a cardboard peripheral would last in the hands of an enthusiastic child or drunken adult. (Nintendo says it will offer replacement cardboard bits.) But there's no gainsaying the fact that this is a bright new idea. The videogame console (as well as the smartphone) was already in a way a universal toy, but the physicality of the Toy-Cons is very appealing. Flat screens by themselves are so over: the cutting edge now seems to be to go totally virtual (PSVR), or actually tangible.

A deeper criticism of Labo, though, would be that it represents a wider social trend: the corporate appropriation and perversion of the ideals of creativity. The Nintendo ad goes big on the word 'Make', but this isn't really making; it's just assembly. You fold the cardboard one way according to the instructions and get one predesigned thing. In the same way I did not really 'make' my Ikea bookshelves. The very name 'Labo' implies a space for creative exploration, but the only creative input the customer is afforded into these devices is decoration of the finished object. "Nintendo Labo invites anyone with a creative mind and a playful heart to make, play and discover in new ways with Nintendo Switch," said Nintendo Europe



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> The Nintendo ad goes big on the word 'Make', but this isn't really making; it's just assembly

head Satoru Shibata, which is a nice sentiment, but it basically amounts to just colouring in.

The same, naturally, is true of modern Lego sets that are designed to become one particular thing. When I helped my nephew build his elaborate Batwing over Christmas, we had a lot of fun, but we never had any choice about which tiny plastic part to put where. The experience was less like 'making' something and more like putting together an extremely elaborate piece of flat-pack furniture for a very tiny person's garage.

The trouble with complaining about all this, though, is that it is to deny the fact that, most of the time, this is all we want. It's so exhausting and stressful to be creative. Of course you can still buy sets of Lego that are general construction kits with which you can build any old random nonsense, but the popularity of the predesigned kits tells us something true about ourselves. Most of the time we want to be entertained, not to make our own entertainment.

So the fact that you have to assemble your Nintendo cardboard toy or your Lego batwing yourself is a kind of homeopathic dose of agency to make the act of consumption feel more noble. It is placebo creativity, just as choosing actions in a videogame with branching storylines is placebo creativity: even as we drive the game's narrative engine down one path rather than another, we still want to be shown how the story will turn out, not write it ourselves. As music geeks will recognise, an analogous temptation is built into every new synthesizer or guitar effects unit: these are tremendously powerful tools for you to sculpt your own unique sound, but many people, terrorised by infinite possibility, just stick to the presets. (At least in this context you're still kind of forced to be creative when you actually start playing the instrument.)

So the commercial invitation to 'make' something that has, to all intents and purposes, already been made, is one modern solution to the paradox of choice. As psychologists have shown, too many options don't make us happy in our freedom; they make us freeze up in indecision and terror of choosing the wrong thing. In this sense, we are all like Buridan's ass, the poor animal in the medieval thought experiment that found itself standing equidistant from two bales of hay, and being unable to choose between them eventually starved to death. Compared to which prospect, the existence of elaborate cardboard peripherals for videogame consoles seems rather a small price to pay.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

A friend of mine has a wonderful theory about what happens when you die. Rocking up at the pearly gates, or the river Styx, or the precipice to the endless abyss of nothingness or whatever, he reckons you'll be presented with your life statistics; a reams-long list of all the things you did, big and small, during your short time on Earth. Your average hours slept each night; the number of trains you caught; how many drinks you bought for people you'd only just met, or times you passed wind in public. This is a fine pub-table subject, since you can really get into the weeds with it – and we have, over the years. My personal favourite is a record of the number of times you unwittingly passed true love on your commute. Ideally with times, places and faces attached, though I realise by that point the details will be more than a little moot.

The purpose of this isn't to remind us all that life is short – it feels enough like that at this time of year as it is. Rather, it shows our basic, in-built love of statistics, especially when they relate to our own personal growth. This has, of course, been a foundational element in RPGs for years, and is increasingly vital in games of all stripes. Yet it's bleeding over into real life, too. When I started on **Edge** a little over seven years ago, the term 'gamification' was the hot new thing, on the lips of every keynote speaker at industry conferences across the globe. Videogames were going to make real life better, we were assured, with levelling and achievement systems predicted to raise consumer engagement in all kinds of fields.

So it proved, to a point, despite the understandable cynicism. One of the many reasons I've all but stopped using Facebook is the rate at which my news feed came to be dominated by, in particular, people's Strava exercise records. I mean, it's great that you've beaten your personal-best time round Clissold Park. I am happy for you, but it's a naked boast that gives me nothing beyond a pang of guilt at my own sedentary lifestyle.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

When your nan's asking for a bloody Fitbit for Christmas, clearly gamification has had an effect

Strava's only real purpose, to people that don't use it anyway, is to somewhat dilute the rate at which Facebook outs their former schoolmates and colleagues as racists, or really mean Brexiters, or both. Another one for the post-death stats, please: bigots inadvertently associated with, broken down by year. I can only hope 2017 was the peak.

But look, when half your Facebook friends are posting lap times and your nan's asking for a bloody Fitbit for Christmas, clearly gamification has had an effect. And perhaps, if I'm being kind, it was the constant passive-aggressive pestering of Strava and its ilk that finally saw me ringing in the new year with a promise to lose some weight. Shortly after I joined **Edge** I remember being outside a conference on a smoke break, telling a colleague of my disappointment at how clean-living people in this profession were. I'd expected heavy drinkers on two packs a day with sustainable middle-class drug habits; instead I got people with gym memberships who called it a night after two beers and a salad. People are just fitter these days, I suppose – and from what I've heard I should really have got into the whole writing-about-games thing in the late '90s, hoo boy – but I get it now. This is a job that involves a lot of sitting down doing nothing but pressing buttons. If you don't do anything to offset it, you're only ever growing outwards. So it has proved.

Now, I've tried to do this before, but I've always run out of steam – and that, I realise, is precisely where gamification comes in. Or, perhaps, statification. I'm using a weight-tracking phone app that gives out badges for certain milestones, but they don't draw me in particularly; nor do the community-set challenges that task you with losing a set amount within a certain time period. But the stats – oh, dear lord, the stats. I can tell you with pinpoint accuracy how many calories I've taken in, how many I've burned, and the effect it's had on my weight every day for the last month-and-a-bit.

I cannot explain how much I *love* that. It may not quite be a list of my lifetime stats, but it's converting a significant part of my real life into a videogame-like series of numbers, and that naturally sets something off in me. It's working, too. Hopefully, it'll help ensure I wait a little longer before I find out what really waits when we shuffle off this mortal coil. That would mean more time sitting on my arse pressing buttons – which, really, is the only kind of gamification-of-life that truly matters.

Nathan Brown is ***Edge****'s editor, and hopes to be presented with this page's lifetime overdue days when he dies*



ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

When we launched Typhoon we were self-funding everything, but within a few months we were fortunate enough to partner with a big publisher, which injected enough money to allow us to grow a small, functioning team and focus solely on making our first prototype. Towards the end of last year we'd put together a solid two hours of our game, which included a fully functioning core loop, and a sample platter of encounters, creatures and mechanics.

And while we were excited and satisfied with the progress we were making, we still had a laundry list of issues. Chiefly, we weren't happy with our visual direction, and we weren't hitting all of our design goals, but we had a robust chunk of our game working and you could engage in an honest discussion about what was good or bad with working code instead of just hand waving and hopes.

At this point we expected a discussion on the merits of the software or the current state relative to the initial pitch, but instead found ourselves focusing on how big the game could be in the end (we wanted to start small – they wanted the opposite) and whether we could support some new hardware and software features that they wanted us to push.

It quickly became obvious that we weren't going to be able to make the kind of game that would fulfill their corporate objectives, and to be honest, even us using the term 'corporate objectives' made us realise that this wasn't why we started the company. So we broke up. It was mutual and very amicable, and the deal has left us in a far better position than six months ago: we have a demo, we have 20 employees hard at work in our own office, and we have a much clearer idea of what it is we want to build.

But we still need to be as critical as possible about our process, our idea, and especially our size. I estimate we cut about 75 per cent of what I would traditionally think of as a 'triple-A' scope, but it wasn't enough. Our original pitch included the idea that while we couldn't make a massive game, we could make a really focused sliver of those games at the same level of quality. To do that, we cut whole departments. No PvP if the game was not going to focus on it; no big cinematic teams as we wanted players to generate their own stories; no more dialogue and scripting team, since we wanted a silent protagonist who embodied the player, rather than a character you could inhabit; no more level or mission scripting because we wanted a world that was immersive and systemic; and finally no second-screen companion game, 3D TV support or other novelty tech. Honestly, who cares about that stuff outside of a panicked marketing department?



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

I'd rather we made a game that people actively disliked, rather than a game nobody noticed

But the scope still wasn't tight enough. There's a Post-It on my monitor which reads, 'Why would anyone care?', which I think is a pretty decent question to ask yourself as a designer whenever you're proposing a new game or feature. I'd rather we made a game that people actively disliked, rather than a game nobody noticed. (There's a reason that if you spam the positive-emote button in *Army Of Two: The 40th Day*, Salem and Rios engage in an awkwardly long embrace.)

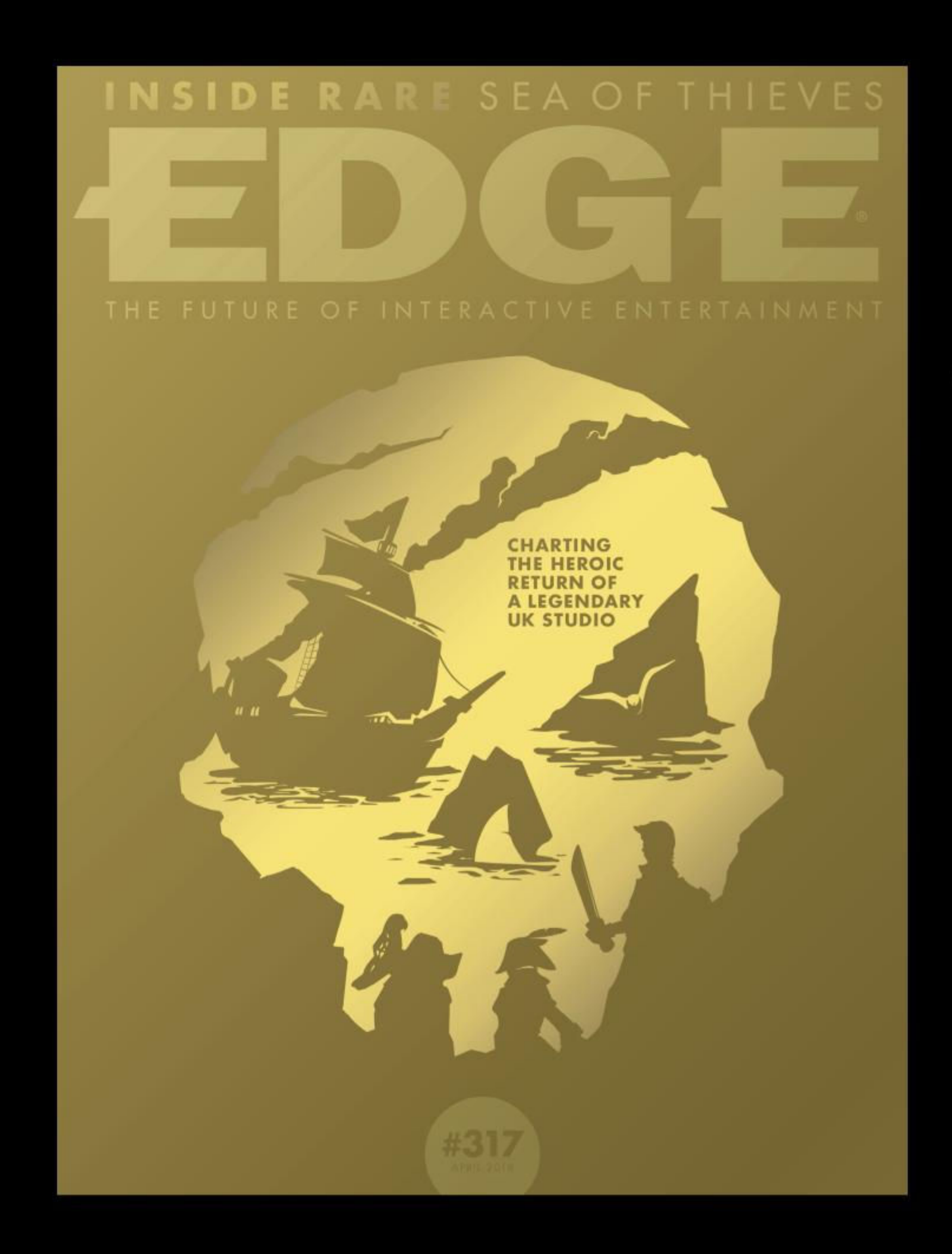
So we are cutting everything that isn't either a) physically impossible to ship without, or b) something that provokes a strong emotional reaction among the team. This means we can justify the work as being absolutely necessary, or capable of making someone care about our game.

It's a surprisingly liberating moment. Sometimes you get caught up in trying to solve the problem, without taking a moment to step back and decide whether perhaps you can just remove the entire feature instead.

On a large team you can cover a few side bets to see whether they bear fruit. For example, the entire naval system for *Assassin's Creed III* and, later, *Black Flag*, began by flying two engineers from Singapore to sit behind me for a few months. We wanted to at least build a few prototypes to see if we could come up with something that felt good and was worth investing in, and I knew we had something when even the first iterations generated strong reactions. Most people loved it; a few people said that this was turning the assassin into a pirate, but everyone was paying attention.

At Typhoon we only have the time and resources to go all-in on a single bet. And more terrifyingly: because this column is being written while we're developing the game, you'll get to see if it works in realtime.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick



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#317

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Get the band back together

Developers love solving two problems with a single idea, and so do we. This is a curious month for Hype: on one hand we have teams of veteran developers going back to ideas they explored in the formative years of their careers. On the other, young, small teams are exploring the future shape of music games. Two very different groups with wildly varying philosophies on the future of interactive entertainment – and both summed up by a single headline. Magic.

Underworld Ascendant (p36) sees members of the team behind genre-defining 1992 RPG *Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* reunite to see what modern processing power, and 25 years of progress in game design, can do for an idea that proved the genesis for the immersive sim. Likewise, *Two Point Hospital* (p46) sees a team led by some of the creators of 1997's *Theme Hospital* reunite to explore what 2018 can offer the sorely underexplored hospital-management game. Neither, as you'll discover in the pages that follow, is a mere reunion tour, topping up ageing coffers with the promise of nostalgia.

As for our musical youth? *Wandersong* (p44) plays with the concept of music as mechanic in a wistful 2D adventure. And in *Rhythm Doctor* (p48), a team working remotely in Malaysia and Peru offers up a rhythm game that doesn't break the fourth wall so much as shatter it, feed the noise into a sampler and spit it back out in brilliant, staccato bursts of dizzying experimentation.

Some might call this headline-led style of writing 'lazy journalism' (seriously, you can stop sending those emails now, we get it). If it's proper shoe-leather stuff you're after, *The Occupation* (p40) has you covered, with its tale of an investigative reporter nosing around the northwest of England for four realtime hours, wondering whether to blow the whistle on a bombshell of a story. Now that's what we call headline news.

MOST WANTED

Chrono Magia Android, iOS
With *Puzzle & Dragons* on the wane, Gungho Online Entertainment is turning its attentions to the popular card-battling genre. PAD producer Daisuke Yamamoto reprises his role here and has brought several of his art team with him, while Sega legend Yuzo Koshiro is scoring.

Jurassic World Evolution PC, PS4, Xbox One
If the idea of a dinosaur-infested *Planet Coaster* wasn't irresistible enough already, a recent flurry of tweets hinting at the breadth and depth of the dino-evolution component in Frontier's next game almost sent us into raptures.

Left Alive PC, PS4
Announced at Tokyo Game Show, it's all gone a bit quiet for Square Enix's thirdperson survival game set in the *Front Mission* universe. With FromSoftware vet Toshifumi Nabeshima directing, and character design from *MGS* legend Yoji Shinkawa, the pedigree's certainly there.



H Y
P E

UNDERWORLD ASCENDANT

The creators of the immersive sim return to the Abyss

Developer Otherside Studios
Publisher 505 Games
Format PC
Origin US
Release 2018

You can't overstate the importance of *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*. A fully textured 3D firstperson game released in 1992, it brought the rich choice and consequence of 2D RPGs into a sprawling underground world of twisting passageways and dark chambers. Objects had physical attributes, so they'd fall and bounce when thrown. Doors could be broken, carefree experimentation with its spell system of verbs and nouns opened up multiple ways of tackling every situation, and once you'd learned their languages, you'd talk with your enemies as much as fight them. Open-ended, atmospheric and embodied, it was the game that launched Looking Glass Studios and the careers of developers **Warren Spector**, Doug Church, Paul Neurath and many others who went on to make waves in creating the body of games that followed – *System Shock*, *Thief*, *Deus Ex*, *Bioshock* – a genre which became known as the immersive sim.

Now some of those same developers have returned to make a new *Underworld* game. Not an *Ultima* game, mind you. Paul Neurath, who led the design of the original and went on to found Floodgate Entertainment, which was later acquired by Zynga, spent 20 years negotiating with *Ultima* IP holder EA for its licence. He finally came away with a deal that only released the *Underworld* part, but *Underworld Ascendant* is set in the Great Stygian Abyss, just as the first game is; you once again play as the Avatar; and it features some characters who appeared in the original.

Underworld's Abyss is a network of underground caverns which borders the Underworld itself. Other than the undead which have wandered into its halls it should be lifeless, yet somehow it flourishes, with an ecology which draws energy from mana floating in the air. The raw rock and the ancient ruins that stand in it glow with colourful bioluminescent light, giving *Ascendant* a very different look to the original. It was a challenge to direct *Ascendant*'s art, given that it's based on games which were made for such nascent 3D technology. "To my mind, it's to an extent reminiscent of the earlier games," Spector tells us. "There's a colourfulness that I find very appealing, and that's part of the atmosphere of the original, in that its different locations looked different and it wasn't a bleak world."

"We're trying to do something a little different to the common trend of hyper-realism in Game Of Thrones and Lord Of The Rings," adds game director and writer **Joe Fielder**, who was previously a writer and producer for *Bioshock Infinite* and the *Medal Of Honor* series. "We're going for something more raw and roughly hewn. A lot of ▶





Otherside Studios' Warren Spector (top) and Joe Fielder



ABOVE **Being close to the Underworld, many of the enemies you'll encounter are undead. You'll find archers standing at vantage points, and well-armed champions patrolling the ruins below. They're dangerous, yes, but stealth might get you past.** LEFT **Gravitate is a flexible spell which can pick up objects, such as the many arcane crates which are found scattered around the caverns of the Abyss. They'll maintain their positions for a while, so they can act as a hanging bridge to new areas**



UNDERWORLD ASCENDANT



The quest hub is a Tangier-like city of packed together buildings. Here you'll interact with NPCs from the three different factions

inspiration has come from early D&D and miniatures. We're calling it internally 'pulp fantasy'; we're really wanting to play with the mythic roots of the series." If you remember the cover of *The Stygian Abyss*, of a warrior cautiously descending Escher-like steps towards a monster in the foreground, it captures some of that atmosphere.

When Neurath asked Spector to join Otherside, Spector had spent a couple of years teaching at the University Of Texas since the closure of his previous studio, Junction Point, and he jumped at the chance to make games again. "I'd started to get kind of antsy," he says. He and Neurath went on the road to raise funds and gather a team. They took on Doug Church as an advisor; Tim Stellmach, who helped design *System Shock*, as lead designer; and Nate Wells, artist on *Bioshock* and *The Last Of Us*. Together they discussed how to update so venerable a game, deciding

> ***"We can make sure the environments change with designer-curated variety"***

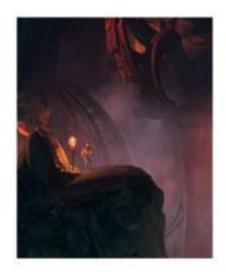
to not only follow up on *Underworld* but on the immersive sim as a whole. "We're taking things further by going deeper on simulation and giving players even more control over the experience. That's true of both *Ultima Ascendant* and *System Shock 3*," says Spector, whose main job at Otherside is not working on *Ascendant* but directing *System Shock 3* at a second studio in Austin, his home town. "I'm not going to name names, but I will say that most of the games that have followed since *Thief* and *Deus Ex* are highly scripted and much more linear. They give players fewer opportunities to tell their own stories."

Opening up more player choice, he says, is a matter of merging *The Stygian Abyss*' original principles with modern world simulation and systems-driven design – things that were entirely impossible in the early 1990s. Thus, in *Ascendant* objects are imbued with physics and material properties, so that flammable things burn and heavy things fall with greater force. Today that's hardly radical, but *Ascendant*'s difference is giving players a high density of different objects and properties to play with, knowing that complexity will emerge from them. Glueballs, for example, are found as a seed pod on vicious rippers – hunched, tree-like plants with long claws. Pick one and throw it into the joint of a rotating blade trap to seize it up. Throw it on to a wall, and then throw a crate onto it, and you have the start of a bridge. Many of these little feats, as the game calls them, will earn the player faction reputation and other rewards to encourage creative play.

***Ascendant*'s magic system,** which has you casting spells using phrases made from magical words ('Slow Time' or 'Create Plant'), or with wands loaded with specific spells, further supports these material tricks. Gravitate is a spell which can pick up multiple objects and arrange them into configurations which might act as a ladder to ascend a wall or a barrier against assailants. Harm Wood will instantly destroy a door; Bind Spirit will freeze a marauding skeleton in its tracks. Or you can take a more agile approach, investing in skills such as Wall Run and Wall Jump.

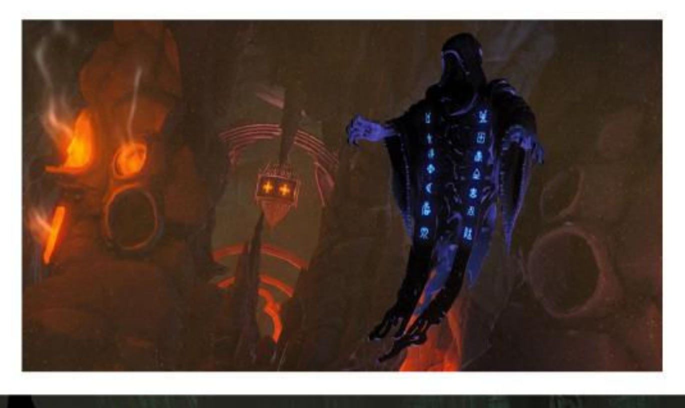
And more than that, the chambers of the Abyss are designed to change over time. You might visit a location several times as you embark on quests from the game's three factions, performing such tasks as locating some MacGuffin, mapping out an area or raising the water level, and each time it will be populated with different enemies, items and structures. "With our team size, we know that we're not going to do hundreds of miles of environment," says Fielder. "But those places become static over time, so while we have this constraint we can also make sure the environments grow and change with designer-curated variety."

Over the course of the game, the threat will rise. Fielder describes *Ascendant*'s campaign as having a boardgame-style doom counter hanging over it. Creatures from the lower depths will rise, cleared areas will repopulate, and as you interact with the factions you'll have to manage their differing goals. In aiming to re-school the immersive sim, *Ascendant* has pitched itself a stern challenge, but its solution, in exchanging sprawling open worlds for dynamic and deep ones, is tantalising. ■



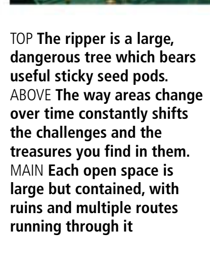
Tight team

Ascendant's in-house team is just 14 people strong, a far cry from the hundreds of people who made *Epic Mickey 2*, Spector's most recent game. "When Paul and I talked about Otherside in the early days, we both looked at each other and said, 'Oh my god, I never want to work in a 200-person team again'," he says. He describes Otherside's scale as "indie-plus-plus", a size with which he's familiar from the good old days. "Our games have always been smaller in terms of world, but deeper than a lot of others, which go miles wide but their simulation is really an inch deep. We go the opposite, an inch wide and a mile deep. What that means is that we have to create less content, but have to build more robust systems."



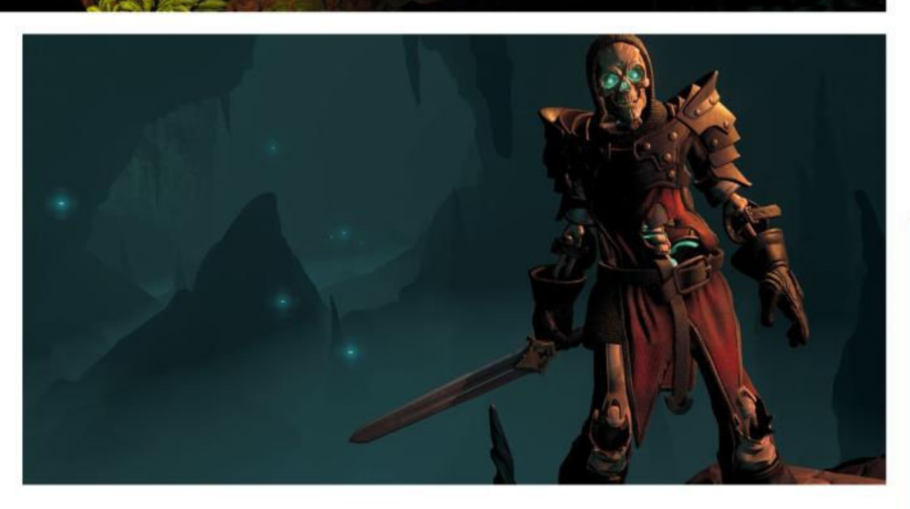






TOP **The ripper is a large, dangerous tree which bears useful sticky seed pods.** ABOVE **The way areas change over time constantly shifts the challenges and the treasures you find in them.** MAIN **Each open space is large but contained, with ruins and multiple routes running through it**

TOP **If you die, you'll respawn where you last chose to place a Silver Sapling.** RIGHT **Creative play against a champion, such as dropping a crate on it, might see you awarded with a skill point**





Given the realtime structure, you won't see everything in a single run. "It lends itself perfectly to replayability in that respect," designer Pete Bottomley says, though he wants players to feel satisfied after their first playthrough



HYPE

THE OCCUPATION

Intrigue, stealth and proper journalism: an immersive sim with an explosive start

Developer/publisher	White Paper Games
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	UK
Release	2018







TOP **Making sure that each NPC feels like a character has been a very important consideration for Bottomley.** ABOVE **Not all of the information you obtain will be consistent. Bottomley says that players will get "different versions of the truth" as a result.** LEFT **Prioritising is key: you'll have several meetings on your agenda, but do you have the time to attend them all?** BOTTOM **Console versions are in the offing, though a decision hasn't yet been taken on whether they'll be released alongside the PC version, or a few months down the line**



THE OCCUPATION

The Occupation's prologue leaves the player with more questions than answers – it's done its job perfectly. We're cast as Scarlet, a determined young woman working for the government who can no longer turn a blind eye to a forthcoming act that's set to have a dire impact on civil liberties. Taking matters into her own hands, she's sneaking around after work hours, looking to get into a locked office and obtain a series of encrypted files.

Scarlet's no Sam Fisher, but the security guards are easily avoided. The process of unlocking the door in question, however, is complicated: first, we must swipe a card, then input a security code, and finally push the handle before the lock resets. At first, we don't even have the code, but then Scarlet's pager bleeps – well, it is 1987 – to reveal a four-digit number. Evidently, she has some assistance in this matter, but from whom? Regardless, we've been fumbling too long, and the guard has spotted us. He's surprised we're still here, but he's not suspicious: we do work here, after all. He wanders off, and we're free to try again. Mission belatedly accomplished, we make our way back out, Scarlet's inner monologue voicing her doubts on her journey home. Then, just as she arrives, we hear an explosion.

It's a striking opening, thick with intrigue. It's also a tutorial, after a fashion, letting you know that this is a game about exploring places you're not supposed to be; a game about leaning around corners, crouching behind desks and peeking through blinds as patrolling guards wander by. And in acknowledging that Scarlet's position is what lets her off the hook, it also lets us know we won't always get away with being caught. "If you don't have weapons and you can't run out of ammo, or you don't have a health bar, how do you punish the character in a game with stealth elements?" designer **Pete Bottomley** asks.

The answer is to use up one of the game's most valuable resources: time. That in turn will limit your opportunities to obtain the other most valuable resource: knowledge. *The Occupation* is set in realtime, with a four-hour window to uncover the mysteries surrounding the explosion and the ominous Union Act. Scarlet may be the catalyst for events, but for the most part you'll be playing as investigative journalist Harvey. That inevitably means snooping around gathering information.

While that opening sequence captures the illicit thrill of transgressive acts, it's not quite the same once we realise we're not going to be punished. But the knowledge that your actions will have more significant consequences through the rest of the game should ramp up the excitement. Bottomley, a big fan of *Deus Ex*, *Thief* and *Dishonored*, is keen to capture both their emergent storytelling and the prickly tension of their stealth mechanics – without giving the player the opportunity to fight back. "We'll never force the player to go where they shouldn't be," Bottomley says. "It's an opt-in approach." But who is going to be able to resist opting in when presented with an open door, particularly as a character charged with exposing possible government secrets? "If you are caught, the guards will ask you to leave, and then if you won't they'll take you to the security office," he explains. The first time you'll just get a telling off, but you'll have lost 15 minutes; if you're discovered again, they may well detain you for twice as long. As a result, you'll be forced into micro-decisions at several key moments, leaving you unsure whether to risk eavesdropping on a conversation until its conclusion, or if you can afford to wait for a safe to open and yield potentially vital contents.

"We'll never force the player to go where they shouldn't be. It's an opt-in approach"

There are two more stories besides, focusing on the fallout of Scarlet and Harvey's actions: away from the political ramifications, we'll get to see the personal impact of the attack. "We've got eight or nine characters that we have to account for and create their own motivations," Bottomley says. "That was fun to do, and you don't necessarily see that from a lot of smaller teams. Because games like *Ether One*, *Gone Home* and *Firewatch* are born from constraints, avoiding tackling 3D characters because they're a pain to figure out." And since figuring out three-dimensional characters is what *The Occupation* is essentially all about, both player and developer have a fascinating challenge in common. ■



Hit the north

We don't see too many games set in northwest England. For White Paper Games, the setting was as much a conscious reaction to its previous game as a desire to evoke its Manchester home: *Ether One* was based in a relatively flat, coastal Cornish town, and Bottomley was keen to introduce a more industrial setting this time, with a stronger sense of verticality. "There's something about the architecture and the pop culture around us – when you walk through Manchester, if you keep your head down, everything seems very similar, but then you look up and you're like, 'Where did all these buildings come from?' With the political undertones of the game, the setting made sense. There was no stronger intention behind it, beyond us thinking it was interesting to focus on."

Developer/publisher Dumb And Fat
Format PC, Switch
Origin Canada
Release 2018





WANDERSONG

Play the heroic, er, bard in this noteworthy musical adventure

When you want a player to feel like a big deal in a videogame, giving them a big sword to wave at their problems is usually a good call. In *Wandersong*, however, the first weapon our genderless hero finds is casually tossed aside, a ring made up of eight coloured sections appearing instead. Moving our cursor around it produces a merry series of musical notes, and our surroundings immediately begin to bob along to our song. It's no blade, we suppose, but we suddenly feel pretty powerful nonetheless.

It wouldn't make much sense to give a bard an instrument of death as opposed to, well, an actual instrument. The idea to cast a musician as the hero came from creator **Greg Lobanov**'s 5,000-mile bike trip across America. "The first games I was making about it were about biking, with people on bikes – really literal elements of it," he tells us. "But it wasn't the biking so much as the adventure. I was listening to music every day, and singing, and meeting different types of people." *Wandersong*, then, sprang from the feeling Lobanov had when his bike would break down at the side of the road, and a stranger would pull up with the perfect tool to fix it. "It felt like the world was this big network of friendship."

A bum note isn't unduly punished; in fact, improvisation seems baked into the design



The erasure of *Wandersong*'s world is imminent, a goddess preparing to reset existence. The bard, however, is out to save the day using their talents to recover pieces of a magical melody, the Earthsong. Progress through this side-scrolling adventure is a matter of making musical connections between people and puzzle elements. We mimic poltergeists' melodies to exorcise them, matching the colours and sounds of their songs. In another section, plant platforms can be coaxed into growing by crooning in the direction we need to travel.

We even manage to befriend a disgruntled yeti, as you do, battling his roars by belting out harmonies in the opposing directions. It's easy to see which way the wind is blowing and mitigate it – but even when we close our eyes, we're able to hear the correct answer. "The game would probably be impossible if there weren't all these different ways of getting information," Lobanov says. "We try to do everything at once for everybody."

In the spirit of accessibility, a bum note isn't unduly punished: in fact, improvisation seems baked into the design. The encouragingly analogue song wheel means a slip-up during a stage performance turns into impromptu riffing. "Often, it's not about putting stuff in, but stopping ourselves from taking away options," Lobanov says. "You can make a song sound terrible, but who cares? The important thing is you can be expressive all the time."

***Wandersong* effectively reflects** its free-wheeling development process. "We have a lot of days where we just hang out, and Em [Halberstadt, sound designer] will say, 'Oh, what if this thing made this dumb sound?' and I'll be like 'That's awesome, I'll make an animation for that', and we'll put something together in a day that's now a huge section. And when we're having fun, it always feels like the right thing to do." The connection Lobanov and Halberstadt have built together has been invaluable: "It just feels like she knows the game better than I do, sometimes."

There's a sense that everyone in this particular adventuring party has found their place. In *Wandersong*, acting as a musical go-between for a friend and the ghost of their mother during a moving, wordless duet, we begin to understand what that feels like – although the bard's story perhaps isn't all sunshine and songbirds. "There's this undercurrent about the roles people play, and who's important, and what it means to be important," Lobanov says. "The bard struggles with that as somebody who spends all their time answering to other people, and doesn't get to have their own voice." ■



Vocal accords

Em Halberstadt's favourite part of the development process has been recording character voiceovers. "Most of it is Greg and I," she says. "We just experiment, direct each other, and we get pretty weird." The bard's goofier ebullitions are provided by Lobanov himself, but the all-important singing is performed by composer John Robert Matz. Lobanov was originally hoping to cast a woman, "but John's audition was clearly the best. He had the range – but he also brought this positive energy, this bard joy into it." Matz being such a perfect fit turned out to be slightly awkward, Lobanov recalls. "Gord [McGladdery, the game's composer] knew John personally, and was like, 'My friend John can do it!' I said, 'No, I want someone I've never met before.' I listened to all the auditions blind, and I was like 'This is the one, who's this... Oh, shit!'"

TOP **Lobanov plans to add a 'dance' button which lets you change your moves by selecting different notes.**
ABOVE **The voice is mightier than the sword: crouching brings songs down an octave, you can whisper-sing, and even produce sharp and flat notes**

TOP **The concert was the most complicated scene to create. "There are so many sections, and each has to respond meaningfully," Lobanov says. "It's so much work to sound like it's not doing anything."**
ABOVE **"The world is set up so it's never out of character to play and have fun," Lobanov says, "shouting music at people and fighting with positivity."**
RIGHT **It's not just ghosts that react to song: small details such as flowers are often affected, too**



Developer Two Point Studios
Publisher Sega
Format PC
Origin UK
Release 2018





TWO POINT HOSPITAL

Another dose of business sim from Theme Hospital's creators

Two Point Studios has a chronic case of the giggles. It is visibly, and audibly, delighted to be working on a spiritual successor to *Theme Hospital*, the 1997 title that won hearts with its smart blend of sim management and goofy humour. *Two Point Hospital* is a return to the good old days for ex-Bullfrog and Lionhead Studios developer **Gary Carr**. "I wanted to work on something like *Theme Hospital* again, appealing to a broader range of people," he says. "*Fable* had a broad fanbase, but to be honest, that was just not my thing. God games are the games I really enjoy working on."

Sensing change at the now-shuttered Lionhead, Carr approached fellow developer, and now co-founder, **Ben Hymers**. "I didn't want to drag Ben into an uncertain future when he had a perfectly good job," Carr says. "Luckily, he was prepared to take the risk." Hymers still needed an income, working at the Sega-signed Playsport Games while the business plan began. ("Games shouldn't be this grown-up, but these days, you have to justify how you're going to make it," Carr laments.) With new contacts at Sega, and the pitch of a fresh take on the '90s god game, it was finally time for the fun bit.

> ***Everything is designed to have a knock-on effect, heightening challenge and comedy***

Two Point Hospital looks as screwy as its 21-year-old inspiration, tasking you with building, managing and making profitable medical facilities designed to treat a variety of humorous fictional illnesses. While the grim, poppable Bloaty Head was the poster disease of *Theme Hospital*, it's Light-Headedness that sets the tone in the new title's launch trailer, as one poor sufferer awakes to find he has a giant lightbulb for a head. And without the restrictions of '90s technology, *Two Point Hospital*'s strange scenarios will be even more complex. Building waiting rooms and operating theatres is still a few clicks away, but myriad overlapping systems convolute. "There's a bunch of different character traits that mean something this time," lead designer **Ben Hoskins** says. "People are argumentative, or charismatic." Self-styled entertainers might go dancing across wards, to various reactions from its inhabitants and subtle influences on your profit margins. Everything is designed to have a knock-on effect, heightening challenge and comedy. "It makes you want to play the same scenario in different ways to see what happens," he says. "If I place coffee machines everywhere, and everyone's running around with a caffeine buzz, the toilets are going to be full – but they'll get to appointments quicker." We can't help but imagine the speedruns. "Hopefully that's the kind of thing that will happen on Twitch or YouTube," Hymers says. "People going, 'What happens if I only hire people with this personality trait, or only put down coffee machines?'"

The mainstream draw of a simulation is being able to poke something and see what happens, and in that sense, *Two Point Hospital*'s evolved approach to an age-old genre is well-suited to the current online-gaming climate. *Two Point Hospital* will have cooperative and competitive modes, and enticing daily challenges. An opt-in superbug scenario, for instance, requires constant in-game research on the part of multiple players to treat. "We thought that was a cool way of getting the community to collaborate to overcome something bigger," Carr says. Indeed, it's collaboration and creativity that drives the team. "The majority of people here have come from Lionhead, where you do feel like you're a cog in a machine," Hymers says. "Here, everyone is creating stuff." Carr continues: "It's brilliant. We all bring it all together, and enjoy coming to work each day. Some of the guys here are friends I've worked with for over 20 years." He laughs. "It's great that we can still do this and get away with it." ■



Trust fund

Two Point Studios considered self-funding, but "shied away a little bit" from it later, Carr says. Why? "Because I'm a coward!" he laughs. Hymers explains: "it was the original plan, because there had been a whole bunch of retro-game reboots that had smashed through their targets. But we spoke to some people we know – Gav [Price] at Playtonic, Debbie Bestwick at Team17 – and they both said, 'Actually, Kickstarter is probably on the way out.'" Crowdfunding functions almost like an auction house valuation, and it's a risk. "You've always got to put this slightly made-up budget and hope to blow through it," Hymers says. "Otherwise, you just end up having a way smaller budget."







TOP **Heavily bandaged patients may go walkies, and it appears you might need to hire an exorcist with a hand-vacuum to bust ghosts. Spooky.**
RIGHT **This locale is fairly easy, but find yourself by a ski slope and you'll treat a huge number of broken legs**





TOP **Carr expects the test plan to be "horrendous, because we have all these different behaviour systems now. But it will be worth it, it'll feel alive and fresh."**
LEFT **In Bullfrog style, there's no design document. "There wasn't for *Dungeon Keeper*, or *Theme Park*," Carr says. "We made it up as we went along." Hang in there, Sega**



Developer/publisher 7th Beat Games
Format Android, iOS, PC, Switch
Origin Malaysia, Peru
Release 2018





The local co-op mode is a perfect fit for Switch, and the team is already thinking up hardware-specific ideas. "Maybe you have to feel the rumble instead of hear something," Azman says, "or it pulses in different patterns when you have two players"

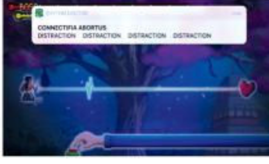
RHYTHM DOCTOR

This offbeat indie rhythm game aorta get your pulse racing

Our demo of *Rhythm Doctor* appears to be bugged. On our second boss fight, the game window is suddenly minimised; we're unable to switch back to a fullscreen view. It's annoying, sure – but these things happen in early game builds, we suppose. And then, the window starts to move to the music. If you thought *Rhythm Heaven* games were unpredictable, with their flipper-rolling seals and rhythmic sumi-e painting, then a few choice levels of *Rhythm Doctor* might give you palpitations.

Inspired by Nintendo's aforementioned series, *Rhythm Doctor* casts you as a remote-working cyber-surgeon in a surreal hospital drama. Treating patients is as simple as hitting a single button on the seventh beat – of their heart, that is. Nail your defibrillation, and the patient is saved. When increasingly complex arrhythmias appear, however, things can get dicey – even before the glitches start.

Programmer, composer and designer **Hafiz Azman** was keen to explore the outer limits of rhythm games. "People make games like *Guitar Hero* because notes scrolling down a screen is the easiest way to convey to a player when they should hit a note," he says. For Azman, it was *Rhythm Heaven*'s focus on internal rhythm that intrigued. "We thought there was a lot of scope in that other side of



ABOVE **Preserving the impact of distractions across varied platforms – particularly Switch – will be challenging. "We've had ideas about playing with the OS," Azman says. "But those have to be approved: Nintendo might not like it if we're giving the impression the OS is broken"**





LEFT **The regular version of the Oriental Insomniac boss fight is hard enough – but choose to play the 'Super' version of a boss fight and the patient will relapse, presenting a much sterner rhythmic challenge and more deceptive visual trickery**



the spectrum," he says. "There are so many things that haven't been done in rhythm games before: swing notes, polyrhythms, different kinds of genres."

Rhythm Doctor grew in size and scope as a Flash game, pulling in hundreds of thousands of views on TIGSource. "That was when we thought, 'Maybe this is something worth pursuing,'" Azman says. A Les Misérables-style level, in which doctors, patients and politicians sing their own tunes and the player must still hit everyone's seventh beat, inspired an overarching hospital theme. "We're always trying to explore, 'What are the things that our game can do that other rhythm games can't do?'" Azman says.

> ***There's more than a suggestion of recent cult hits such as Undertale here***

***Rhythm Doctor's* story** is threaded through several acts, and even features branching paths and levels that change depending on player choice. "We have a lot of levels in between boss fights that build up your skills without surprising you too much," Azman says. "It's part of our game-design flow: normal levels should be more mundane so you can always expect something nice as a reward for completing each act, and boss levels should be something really surprising."

The ones we face display 7th Beat Games' wilful disregard for the fourth wall. A samurai patient's signal-jamming heart infection, for instance, causes iOS pop-up notifications, throwing off our timing. The slow electronic ballad of the windowed-out boss fight makes things tough, even before the game flings the action off the side of our desktop, perfectly in time with the drop.

What could be an annoying gimmick instead prompts performative play: without the vital signs to guide us, we must rely on the sense of the rhythm we've built up over the level's eight-bar tutorial and the course of its song, head-nodding to stay on beat. We even find that we do better. Indeed, doctors Paige and Ian offer hints, gleaned from 7th Beat's experience demoing the game, that some find it easier to operate with eyes closed, that hitting the "defibrillator" harder, or drumming along on a table, can help.

It's certainly surprising, often quite funny, and strangely involving (although a poorly signposted instant-restart feature means retrying the most difficult levels becomes wearying). The approach is contemporary, even: there's more than a suggestion of recent cult hits such as *Undertale* here, especially when Ian unexpectedly voices his frustration at our eighth go at a certain boss fight.

"*Undertale*'s a big inspiration," Azman admits. "And when *Doki Doki Literature Club* came out, I felt a bit scared, because it felt like everyone was already going into this fourth-wall stuff. It took it the furthest it could go! So I was wondering, when we release, will people be tired of this stuff already?" On this evidence, and as long as 7th Beat Games has a few more tricks up its sleeve, it won't have any trouble provoking quick reactions. ■

Azman, alongside lead artist Winston Lee and lead programmer Giacomo Preciado, now works full-time on *Rhythm Doctor* with the help of grants from both the Malaysian and Peruvian governments



Compose yourself

There are only so many mad ideas 7th Beat Games can dream up, of course – but there is a solution. A level editor was the most requested feature from *Rhythm Doctor*'s community of fans, to Azman's slight terror. "The editor itself is a magnitude more complicated than the actual game engine," he says. "It's been more than a year now since we started it." It has already spawned over 400 levels, allowing players to add rows, beats, visual effects, cutscenes and more. "People do a lot of ideas that I've never considered, and I can actually use those ideas in the game itself," Azman says. "There are some levels that are just so good that we outright pay the level creator to just include it in the game."



LABO

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** April 27



Nintendo is targeting the mainstream with this wondrously creative new initiative, but this is essential stuff for anyone with an interest in the future of interactive entertainment. Jarring as it may seem to herald something made from such humble materials as the future, Labo seems like a sure-fire success – it reflects a Nintendo that is again near the peak of its powers, expressing its confidence through daring creativity while nudging the medium forward. We wondered how Switch could possibly top its sublime first year. Here, in a piano, a robot suit and a motorbike, hewn from cardboard and lengths of string, we find our answer.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLE FOR AZEROTH

Developer/publisher Blizzard Entertainment **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** Summer



Blizzard's about much more than just *WOW* these days – something that's reflected in the host of pre-purchase bonuses for the MMO's seventh expansion. If a *Hearthstone* card back doesn't sway you, perhaps a *Heroes Of The Storm* mount will; if not, then how about new *StarCraft II* sprays, or *Overwatch* emotes? *WOW* is past its peak, but Blizzard's doing fine – and the MMO itself is robust too. Servers buckled under the load when the pre-purchase scheme went live.

KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

Developer/publisher Cardboard Computer
Format PC, Switch **Origin** US **Release** 2018



It's been five years since the first episode of Cardboard Computer's sublime point-and-click. The fifth, and final, act is soon to arrive, at last bringing to a close one of gaming's longest road trips. A newly released interlude, including a 30-minute live-action segment, further whets our appetite.

ONRUSH

Developer/publisher Codemasters (Evo) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** June 5 (PS4, Xbox One), 2018 (PC)



Codemasters told us in E314 that they had hit the ground running at their new digs, and they weren't kidding. Originally slated for a summer release, this commendably bonkers riff on the arcade-racer template will be roaring off the starting grid even earlier, at least on console. More next month.

DETECTIVE PIKACHU

Developer/publisher Nintendo
Format 3DS **Origin** Japan **Release** March 23



The game that made Danny DeVito spout the immortal line, "What the fuck is Pokémon?" is finally heading west two years after its Japanese debut. Hopes are certainly high: a movie, starring Ryan Reynolds, is already in production.

#317

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY





UNCHARTED WATERS

Rare strikes out into the unknown to make a multiplayer game that's true to its heritage

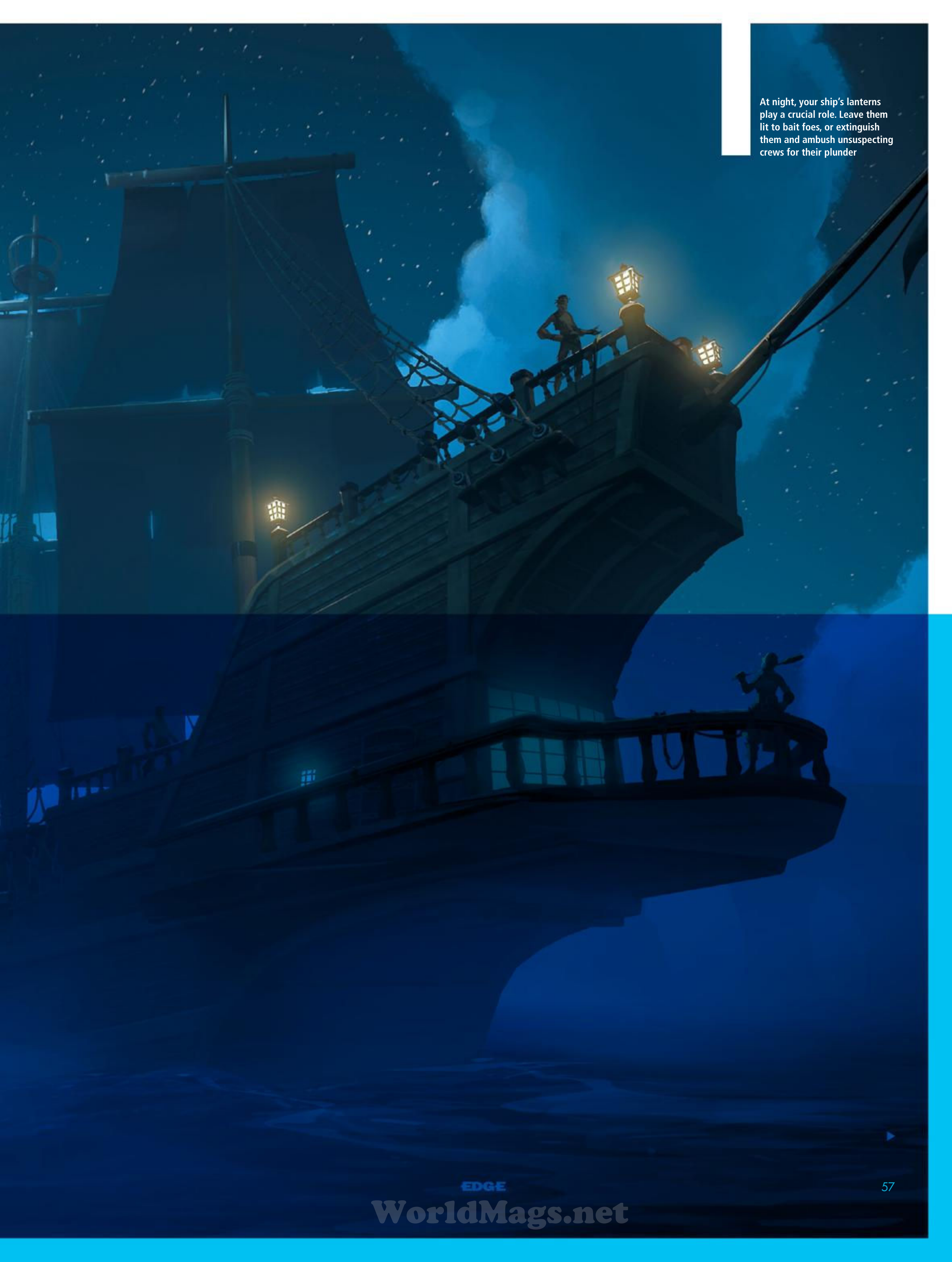
By Jen Simpkins

Rare is, in the best possible way, out of its depth. The maker of *Banjo-Kazooie, GoldenEye 007* and *Viva Piñata* used to be fiercely insular, operating behind tightly locked gates in its remote Twycross country estate. Its latest game, however, marks something of a sea change for the studio. *Sea Of Thieves* is the antithesis of anything that has ever fit onto a cartridge or between four walls, a sprawling multiplayer title hoping to connect players all over the world via a single shared pirate fantasy adventure. It is designed to be accessible to everyone, to generate genuine and unique stories of competition and cooperation between all kinds of players – and to thrive as a community-led creation in the 'games as a service' model that has become a staple of the contemporary game industry. Needless to say, the gates are now open.

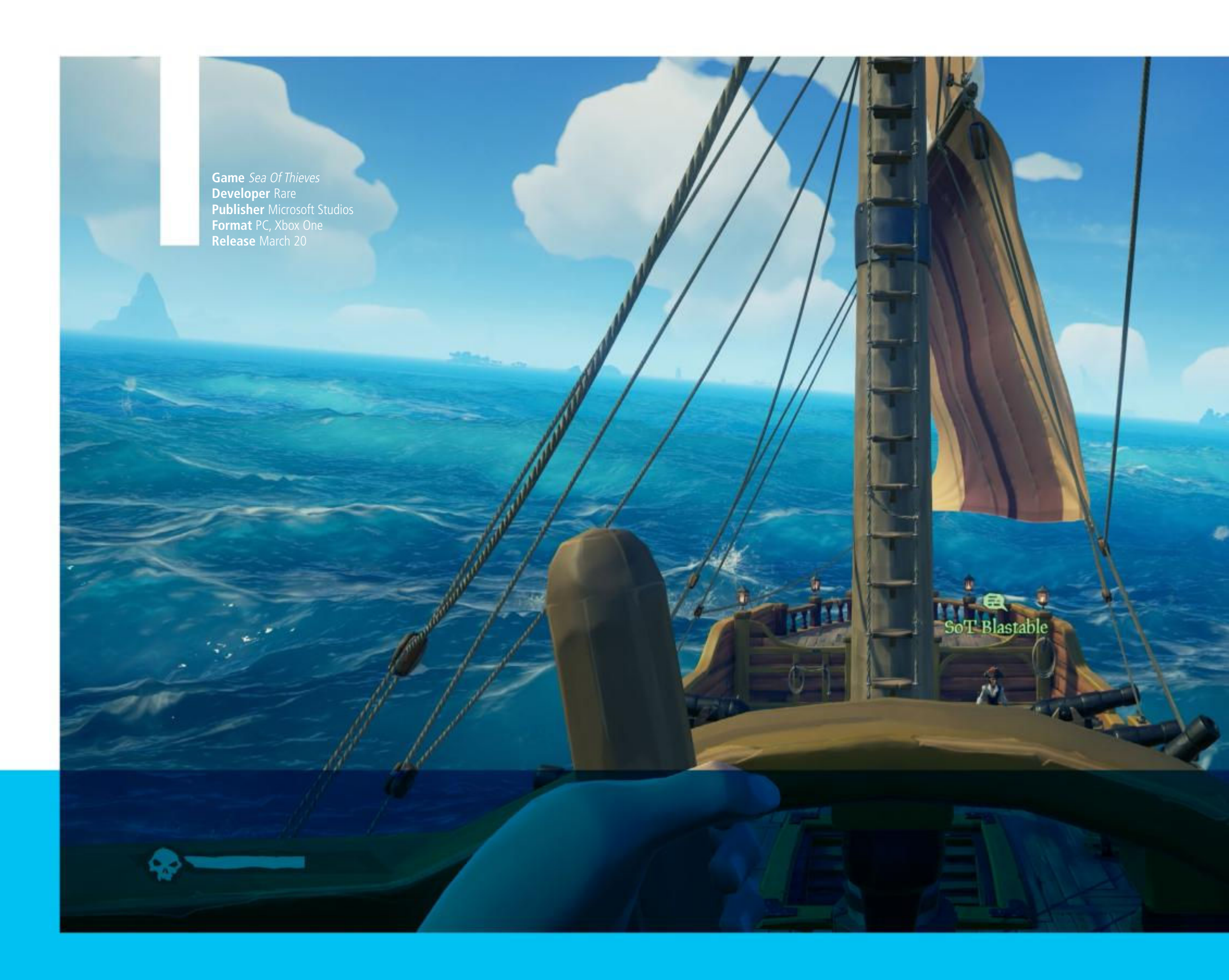
"For me, it feels like we're transforming the studio," PC design lead **Ted Timmins** says. "Historically, Rare never did press, it never had a community. There was nothing around that type of thing. And now we've had to open the doors. There are no guard dogs anymore – genuinely, there used to be guard dogs." Walk into Rare's studio reception today and you'll spot a huge television hung on the wall to your right, cycling through live Twitch feeds of streamers playing *Sea Of Thieves*. It is perhaps the first thing you'd see in the morning as an employee walking into the office: the game you're working on, already in the hands of the players who will establish it. The screen is made up of four smaller televisions, panes in a window to the outside world. This time, Rare is looking out at it. Executive producer **Joe Neate** pulls out his phone and brings up a graph of *Sea Of Thieves'* Google search term numbers. "This," he says, indicating a blip on the screen, "was this year's E3. And this" – he points to a spike around ten times as big – "was our closed beta." ▶



IT'S THE ANTITHESIS OF ANYTHING THAT'S EVER FIT ONTO A CARTRIDGE OR BETWEEN FOUR WALLS



At night, your ship's lanterns play a crucial role. Leave them lit to bait foes, or extinguish them and ambush unsuspecting crews for their plunder

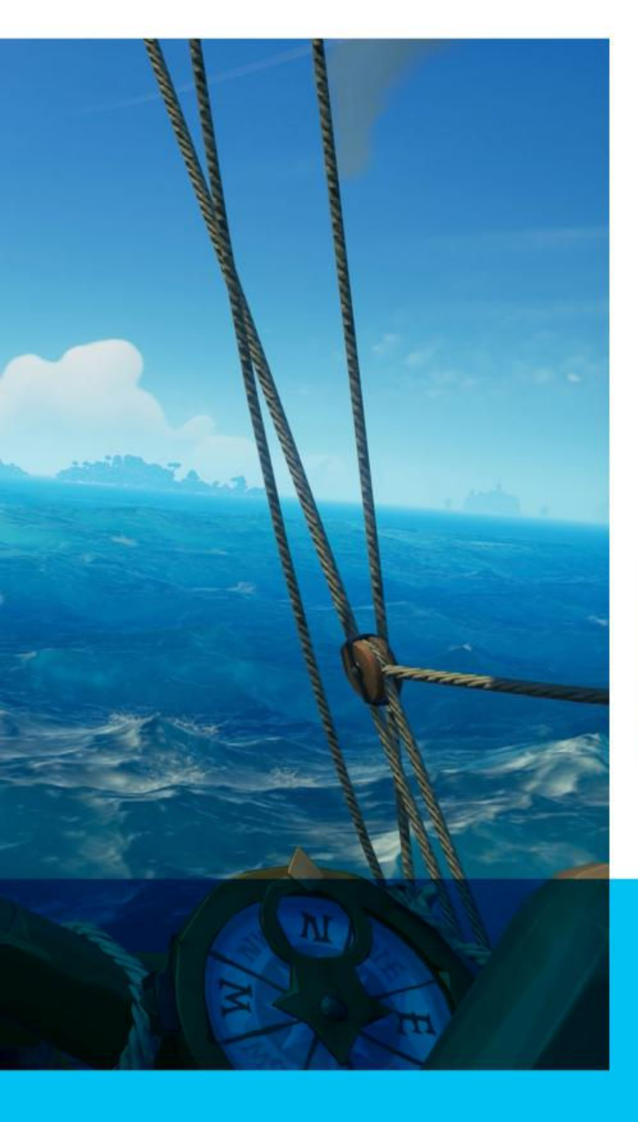


ABOVE **The water alone, splendid and mercurial, makes voyages worth it. Every wave on each server has to align perfectly to make PVP combat viable, a huge technological feat**

January's public playtest saw 332,000 players log in across Xbox One and PC. Over 25,000 of them streamed, or made videos of, their adventures; viewers watched around 14.5 million hours of it. "That's the power of watchable, shareable games," Neate says. "Both are valuable. You see people use their imagination and creativity, and that makes you think, 'What can *I* do?'" While many may watch *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds* to enjoy the show, knowing full well they'd get teabagged into oblivion if they so much as stepped foot on a server, *Sea Of Thieves* is designed to work both ways. It both facilitates and celebrates moments of gleeful silliness that anyone with a twinkle in their eye and a barrel of gunpowder could pull off.

You can adventure across the open seas with a trusty crew or completely alone, learning to sail a ship by angling its sails against the wind and navigating from island to island with just a compass and a map. The goal is treasure, naturally: chests buried in the sand, sunk in shipwrecks or stolen from others. And while it's perfectly permissible to head out into the world solo, weighing anchors, battling skeletons and duelling other players, having a solid crew at your back makes all the difference. The more hands you put to anchor, the faster it rises, making getaways quicker. Fighting off enemies is impossible with an armful of booty, so it pays to bring along a bodyguard on quests to pick off assailants. And while you certainly *can* fire yourself unassisted out of a cannon onto a foreign ship, you might want to consider trying to make friends while you're over there: an impromptu jam session with strangers can often be far more entertaining than simply pinching their cargo and legging it to the nearest trading post. *Sea Of Thieves* is a multiplayer game designed to be not just about rivalry, but also camaraderie, and all the playful variations in between.

"I'm biased, but I actually don't think there's another game like *Sea Of Thieves*," design director **Mike Chapman** says. "Even though Rare's never really made such a multiplayer-focused game before, I think the type of multiplayer game it is is *so* different anyway. I don't think any of us here



BELOW Players meet in the tavern before quests to drink their fill of grog (and vomit it up over crewmates). Wanted posters of highly bloodthirsty players adorn the walls



"WHEN YOU GET A HEADSHOT, YOU APPRECIATE IT MORE – OR JUST THE FACT THAT YOU HIT THEM AT ALL"

have ever made a game like this before. But I think it means we've looked at it with very fresh eyes." While a new era of games including *DayZ*, *Rust* and *Eve Online* sparked early interest in making a multiplayer title, the team was keen for the game to inspire a broader range of emotion in players than simply anger or fear. The idea was to build a game around 'soft skills' – building rapport, dynamically assigning roles, being adaptable in unexpected situations and working together as a team.

Indeed, none of *Sea Of Thieves'* swashbuckling weaponry requires any strict degree of accuracy: timing and experience wins out over twitch reflexes. The pistol is a chunky, clunky little thing that takes an age to reload, while the bullet-drop on the long-range musket is so significant that simply hitting an opponent who's bobbing up and down on a ship of their own is almost farcical (a haphazard crack in its scope serves as a delightfully makeshift crosshair). "At first, when you fired a gun, it used to feel very much like firing a laser," Timmins says. "It hit you straight away. Now when you get a headshot, you appreciate it that bit more – or just the fact that you hit them at all! We made the decision based on cross-play, but once we actually played it, it tonally felt much more fitting to these ancient weapons." And while a few swipes of a cutlass are all we need to dispatch a bog-standard skeleton NPC, it's plain to see where Rare is coming from with the simplified combat once we find ourselves swashbuckling up and down a staircase with another player, metal clanging against metal. It's more about capturing the fantasy of the thing than its grimy reality, the cheerful candour of it all like having swordfights with sticks in the garden when you were kids.

This sense of physicality permeates *Sea Of Thieves,* encouraging in you a creative, freeform approach. Deciding your crew's next task involves assembling in the captain's quarters of a ship, placing a symbolic item on the table, and then sticking a knife beside the most tempting-looking prospect to cast your vote. Glowing skulls signify high-level bounty hunts, while a fancy gilded scroll indicates there's particularly valuable treasure to be won. ▶



PC design lead Ted Timmins





01 Recorded on genuine vintage fare for authentic scratchiness, instruments sync effortlessly with nearby players' tunes. 02 Small interactive details, like the tavern's music box, help build a believable world. 03 The chunky, cartoonish art style plays up the slapstick feel and keeps things readable. 04 A variety of weather casts scenery in lovely new lights. A storm, however, will mess with your compass. 05 Other players' status is visible through dress – but canny pirates may go in disguise







"I'M AFRAID THE ANIMALS HAVE TO DIE; THERE HAS TO BE A SENSE OF CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUR ACTIONS"

Once we decide on our next venture, quickly turning up chest after chest after solving riddles and battling a skeleton captain, the benefits of Rare's studied commitment to *Sea Of Thieves'* physical world quickly become apparent. We spend a good while discussing where to hide the treasures we've accumulated. Most people, we've noticed, place them in the captain's quarters of a ship: we insist on hiding them in various places, lest a band of marauding players find all our nest-eggs in one basket. Chests must be safely delivered to an NPC at an outpost to yield their spoils, whereupon every crew member receives the same amount of doubloons (redeemed for cosmetics and weapons, and unable to be stolen). But getting one there is often more challenging than digging it up in the first place. The Chest Of Sorrows we find, for instance, sobs so passionately that it threatens to sink our ship with floods of tears. After a few minutes of frantic bailing, however, the crackpot plans begin to form. Soon enough, crewmate Neate is hanging patiently off one of the ship's ladders, the bawling chest strapped to his back like a cantankerous infant in a baby carrier as its tears drain into the sea. It is a moment of great and ridiculous triumph – of difficulty overcome not by skill, but by creativity and coordination.

This approach has taken much iteration on the part of the design team. "We used to have it so when you took chests back to the ship, the moment you reached the top of the ladder, it would cash the chest to the ship," Chapman says. A treasure hold on the bottom deck displayed the amount of coins you had collected, which felt satisfying, and other pirates could still fight their way below deck and steal from it – but the chest was no longer a physical object. "The moment we ripped that out, the game became better," Chapman says. "Now, the chest is just a chest. It gets back to the ship and nothing happens, but then you've got all that gameplay that was gone before."

In fact, it turns out that our bid for The Chest Of Sorrows was probably fairly uneventful, in the grand scheme of pirate life. There are currently three main kinds of voyage in *Sea Of Thieves*, each presided over

03

by its own trading company. Our treasure hunt was assigned – and rewarded – by The Gold Hoarders, a faction obsessed with plunder and profit. For those looking for a combat challenge, The Order Of Souls provides bounty-hunting opportunities. But the most logistically difficult – and, by extension, riotously funny – will likely be the trade-related tasks given out by The Merchants' Alliance. Whether they're seeking a number of gunpowder kegs or a clutch of exotic animals, journeys carrying your precious cargo will be volatile. Perhaps you'll have to sacrifice an explosive barrel to prevent a pursuing ship blowing up, or worse, stealing the rest for their own gain. Meanwhile, you'd better make sure you keep on top of fixing holes in the hull if you store your chickens on the lower deck, lest they drown before you can get them home; pigs will need regular feeding; and snakes can be charmed with a tune from your accordion to reduce the danger of your crewmates being poisoned (although if you're really savvy, you'll want to position them around your rarest chests to deter thieves).

"All of the trading companies have been built with a different player motivation in mind," Timmins says. "You've got the player who wants to kill stuff: right, The Order of Souls is perfect for you. You've got the person who wants to explore: that's The Gold Hoarders, they will totally get you exploring. And then for collectors, or those who are more social, then it's like, here's all the animals." We can certainly imagine players refusing to cash in a rare chicken because your crew has grown a little too attached to it. "This sounds a bit sadistic, but I knew we were onto a winner when the team had a very passionate reaction to, 'Right, this week we're working on animations for animals'," Chapman says. "They were like, 'Wait, the animals die?' I'm afraid they have to die, because there has to be a sense of consequences for your actions, but that's the last thing you're going to want – you're going to want your animals to live." Well, quite. We have a sudden, horrible vision of an opponent holding a gun to the head of our beloved pet, Colonel Sanders: "Give us all your cash, or the chicken gets it." Take it. Take it all. ▶



Executive producer Joe Neate



“WE WANTED ‘PIRATE LEGEND’ TO MEAN SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST BEING A COOL HAT OR TITLE”



Higher-grade voyages mean more sophisticated enemies. This skeleton is a crack shot with a cannon, and apparently has an elevated sense of style

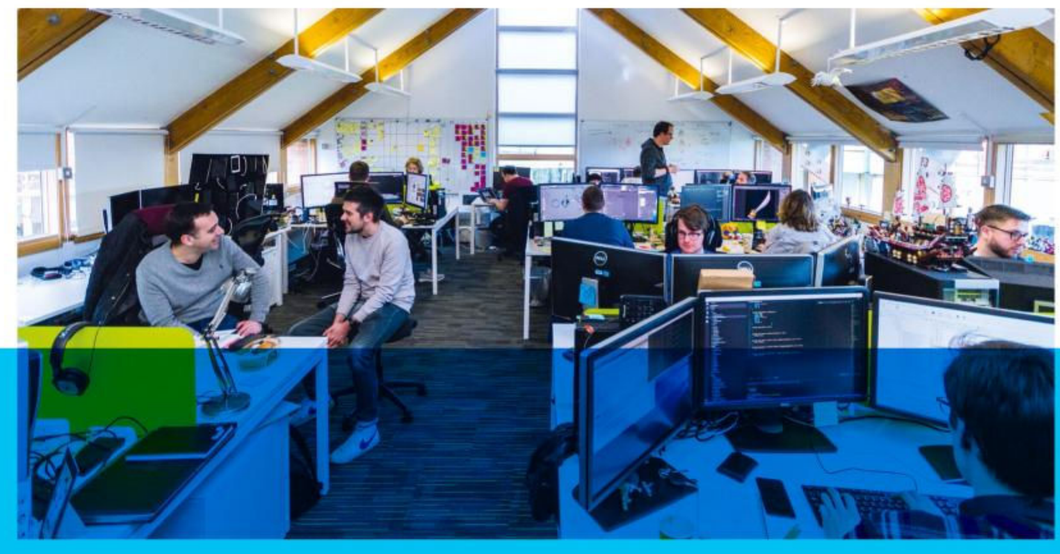
BELOW Rare has committed to its new game's theme: the barns in its 100-acre estate have cannons affixed to the walls. Whether misbehaving devs are made to walk the plank is unconfirmed

SCURVY SEADOGS

Bad behaviour is always a concern when making a multiplayer game, but *Sea Of Thieves* appears to be leading the pack when it comes to creative moderation solutions. "When we did research, it seemed like most toxicity came from people just having a bad day," Timmins says. You can still mute and block, of course, but it's the features that enable players to moderate amongst themselves that most intrigue. While it still needs some work, locking a member of your crew in the brig for a spell sends a clear message that their current behaviour won't fly. And there'll even be a pirate code, hopefully hung in the tavern as a reminder and given to players as a parchment that, like maps, players can physically show each other as a warning sign that a line is being crossed.







LEFT The studio atmosphere is relaxed and friendly. It's not just devs that get involved in creating *Sea Of Thieves*: Rare's receptionist, Anna, sang as the mermaid in the E3 2016 trailer

There will be even more trading companies added as time goes on, we're assured, to appeal to an even greater range of player motivations, and produce more emergent opportunities for teamwork and tension. There are also skeleton fortresses, Rare's version of public events, to raid. They are accessible from the beginning of the game, live ones indicated by skull-shaped clouds thundering overhead. It's a method of drawing players from all over a server's shared sea together. Band together to defeat the skeleton captain, then find the skeleton key that unlocks the vault below the stronghold, and you'll find rewards more numerous than you can carry. Again, Rare is keen to let players figure out their favoured approach. Do you dash in, grab a few chests, check no other players are coming and risk a return journey? Do you team up with another nearby crew and split whatever you find equally – or double-cross them? Of equal interest is the fact that Rare is releasing the Kraken into its waters at launch, an opt-in, opt-out replayable event that'll reward coordinated sailors who manage to pick off each of its gigantic tentacles with cannon fire – or, no doubt, lead a rival ship into its embrace.

All this means nothing, of course, if people don't continue to play the game. Despite the overall success of the beta, the questions still remained of what exactly the long-term goal of playing *Sea Of Thieves* was. It turns out you won't just earn doubloons to buy expensive coats and showy millinery: quests will also reward reputation points, with your level steadily climbing depending on the number and quality of successful missions you complete. Your reputation level is never visible to anyone but you, which Rare hopes will lead to some devious moments of deception. Even if you're an experienced player, you can go undercover, dressing in the rags you started with and unequipping a title so that when you drop a jewel-encrusted scroll onto the voting table, it takes everyone by surprise.

"The idea is that players share voyages," Chapman says. "Power-levelling is, I guess, a bad thing in other games. It's the best thing in *Sea Of Thieves*, and we've fully embraced it. You want to play with people in your crew at a different level of promotion. You want to have that feeling of, 'They've got something I don't yet have access to'. And by forging those connections with



"POWER-LEVELLING IS, I GUESS, A BAD THING IN OTHER GAMES. IN SEA OF THIEVES WE'VE FULLY EMBRACED IT"

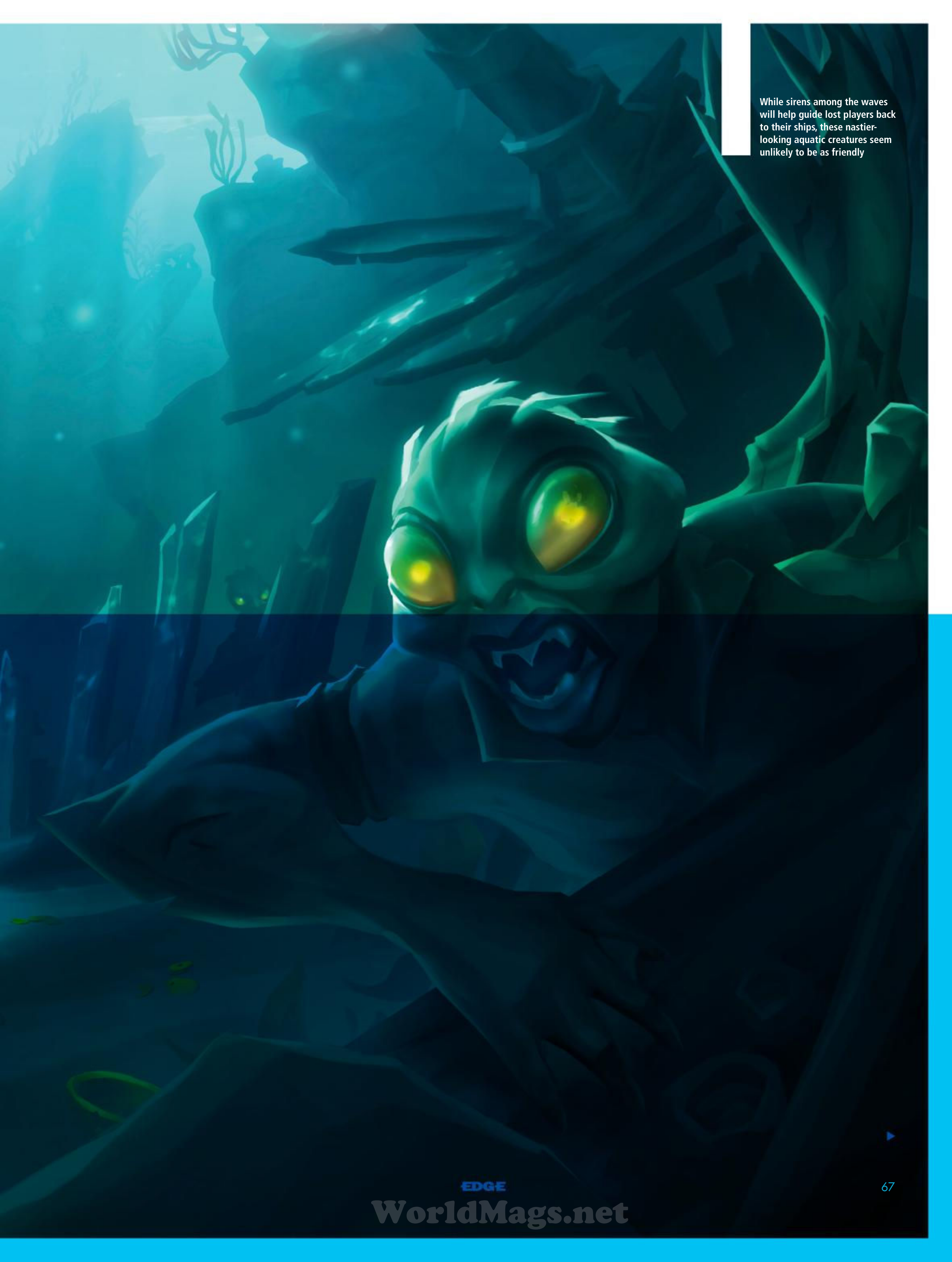
others, it's that whole story of, 'Jack Sparrow's got the map to Fountain of Youth – but he needs a crew to go and get it.'" Making friends with pirates of higher reputation gives you the opportunity to plunder more valuable goods and to face down more skilled AI. Work your way through tough enemies and tricky riddles, increase your standing with all of the trading companies, and you'll find yourself on the cusp of becoming a Pirate Legend. "We wanted it to mean something more than just being a cool hat or title," Chapman says. "We wanted it to be a new way to play." Those who have proven themselves worthy will be bestowed with a special status that will help them uncover a key to a secret pirate hideout seamlessly integrated into the world, and only accessible to Pirate Legends.

Portraits of the month's most notable players adorn the walls, while the ghosts of your similarly successful peers will wander the Tavern Of Legends, doling out dev-written whispers and rumours of new visitors and time-limited events coming to the world. A Pirate Lord vendor, meanwhile, will hand out Legendary Voyages, the most challenging quests in *Sea Of Thieves* that offer the most unique rewards: a whole other tier of special items and cosmetics that are different every time, designed to encourage repeated play. The secret hideout is the velvet rope in a nightclub, essentially – you can even bring a plus-three. "People want to be friends with a Pirate Legend," Chapman says. "They can't get access to the hideout or Legendary Voyages unless they're with you. This is kind of the endgame for *Sea Of Thieves* at launch. It's going to be fascinating to see. Do Legends play with Legends? Do they play with people who've just started, and shepherd other people into the game?" There are even concrete plans beyond endgame at launch – plans that Rare is all too happy to detail. Once Pirate Legends have maxed out their grind, one of the next big updates to the game will introduce the idea of Legendary Captains. The secret pirate hideout becomes their own personal hideout, and the ship therein their Flying Dutchman or Black Pearl. When others see a legendary ship out in the world, bedecked in custom colours, it fundamentally means something. Perhaps you'll beg to join their high-rank adventures; perhaps you'll sneak aboard, steal their treasure, dent their pride and live to tell the tale. ▶



Design director Mike Chapman

"WHEN YOU'RE BUILDING A SERVICE, YOU CAN'T BURN OUT, BECAUSE THE TEAM'S GOT TO LAST"



While sirens among the waves will help guide lost players back to their ships, these nastier-looking aquatic creatures seem unlikely to be as friendly

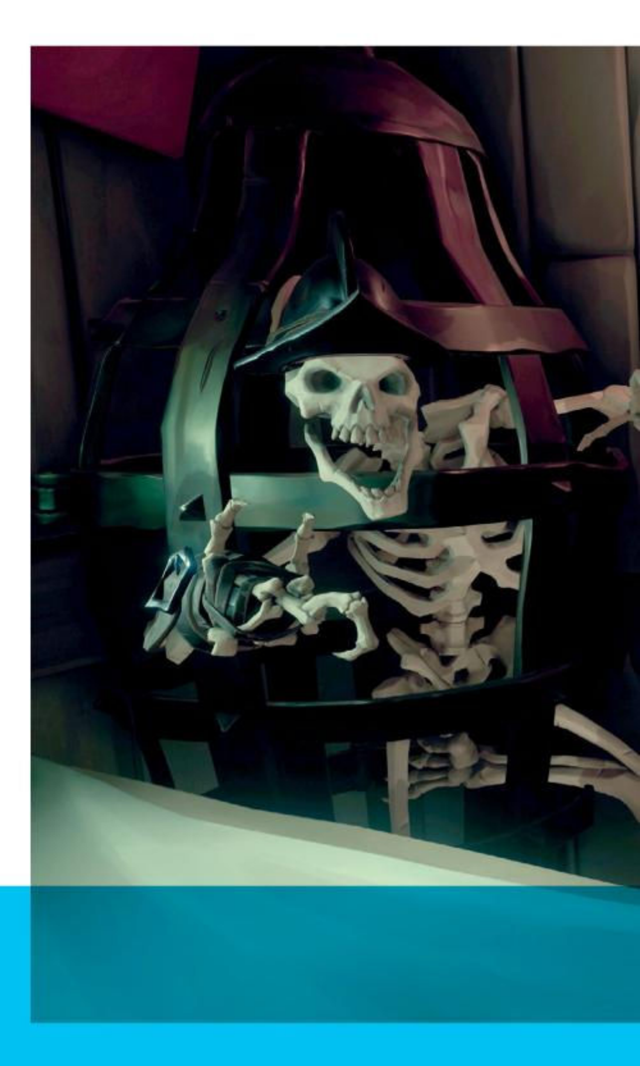




Rather than creating a character, you must choose from sets of randomly generated sea dogs. Rare hopes this encourages roleplaying

A PIRATE'S LIFE?

It took much iteration before Rare landed on the correct theme for its foray into multiplayer. "The common misconception is that we set out to make a pirate game," Chapman says. "We didn't. We set out to make something new and different." A wall in a meeting room ended up covered in concepts: pirates, cowboys, vampires, deep-sea salvage, bounty hunters and secret agents along them. But it was destiny that Rare's next game would be set on the seven seas. "I guess some of it was Rare's heritage," Chapman says. "We've always had an affinity with pirates. I grew up playing *Donkey Kong Country*, which was about a bunch of pirates. It was like, 'Wow, this company thinks the way that I do'. And it seemed like the perfect expression of co-op: in this pirate world, sailing towards the horizon. You're bonded together as a crew against the world."

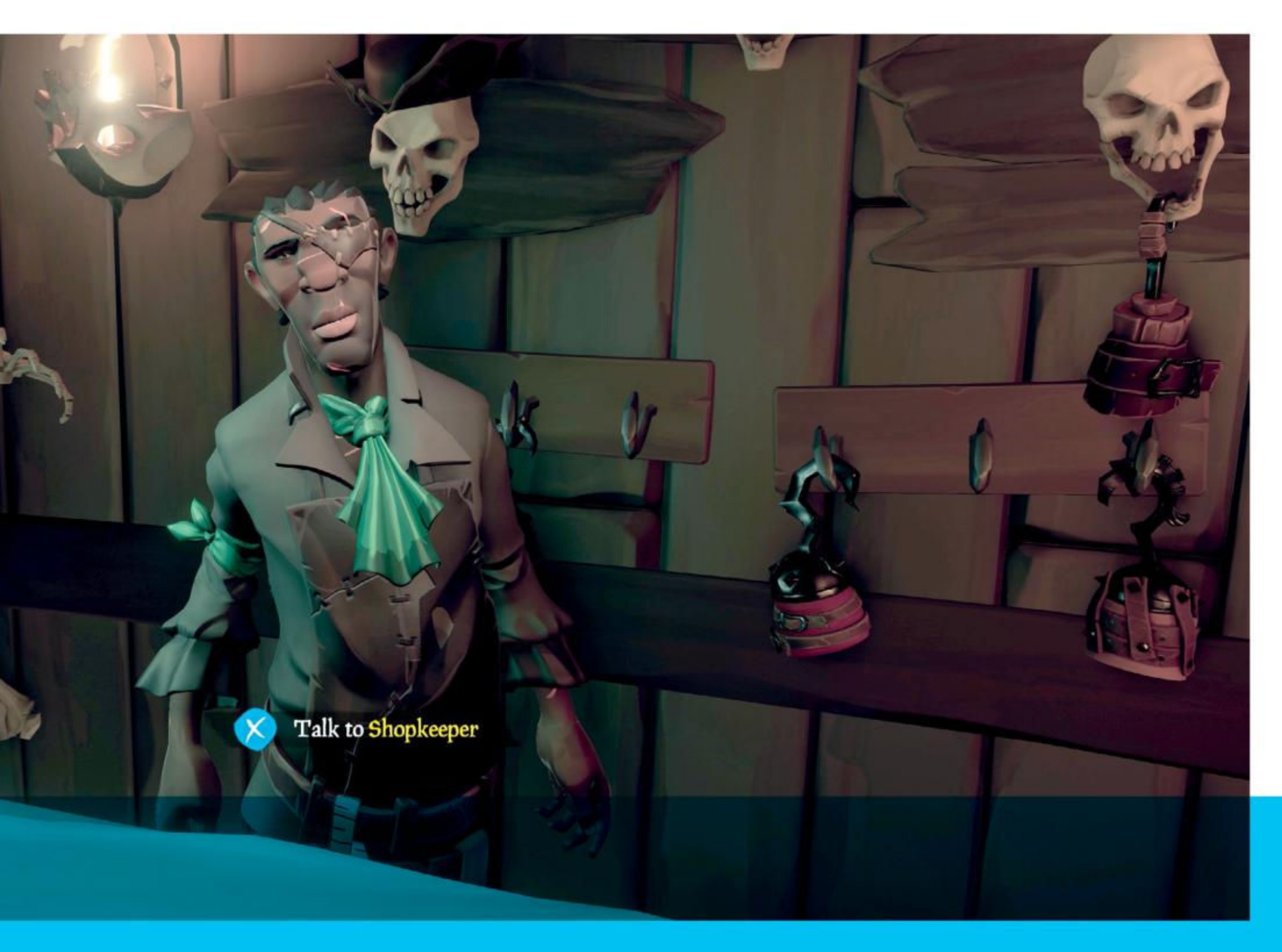


"YOU'LL ONLY EVER REALLY FIND SUCCESS WHEN YOU GET OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE"

We can't help but express a little disappointment at having all of these secrets revealed, and Chapman sympathises: "I would have loved to keep the Kraken, and the hideout, a complete secret. But we decided that players are going to make a purchase decision based on the amount of hours you expect out of the game. You want something to strive for." There are plenty of surprises that haven't been spoiled, we're assured. Indeed, our suggestion that the game would benefit from a way to take in-game photos of wildlife and players is met with a mixture of trepidation and excitement by Neate. "If we were to do anything like that, it would be in our own style, and it would be appropriate to the game," he says. "One of the things we prototyped early on, which we loved, was a painting canvas. And as part of our service, and the game growing and evolving, there's something really interesting we want to do with that. It's possibly my favourite thing we'll ever do in *Sea Of Thieves* – at least of what's on the mid-term road map."

It's testament to Rare's commitment to the future of *Sea Of Thieves* – and its trust that its players will provide the *real* surprises – that it's revealing its secrets so soon. So, too, is this being the first game to be made available through Xbox Game Pass, Microsoft's Netflix-style subscription service, from the minute it launches. "As a creative, as long as you can put bread on the table, and you can afford to go home and feed the family, then you just want as many people playing your game as possible," Timmins says. "We want to be a successful service, and that is driven by the amount of people playing our game. It's an interesting kind of project, really, because historically, I've worked on singleplayer games where you release them, you do a bit of DLC maybe, but that's kind of it."

This particular kind of game is undiscovered territory for everyone we speak to. The development process has been "fundamentally, completely different" to anything Neate has previously made: testing has had to become an automatic system, rather than a manual one, given the massive scale of the game, the constant addition of new features and the need to limit bugs to double digits, rather than in the thousands. "And you never cut things," Timmins says. "In a traditional game, that's the hardest approach. You're literally sat in a room, arguing for six hours sometimes – it's brutal, and you'll go home shattered. Whereas for us it's like, 'Yeah we can deliver that – we'll make that a proper update, and that'll be amazing.' And instead of a six-hour conversation, it's a six-minute conversation, and then



you all get back to work again afterwards," he laughs. "So it's a much more healthy, really lovely atmosphere at Rare at the moment. There's a really healthy buzz to the studio. We're not crunching. When you're building a service, you can't burn the team out, because the team's got to last."

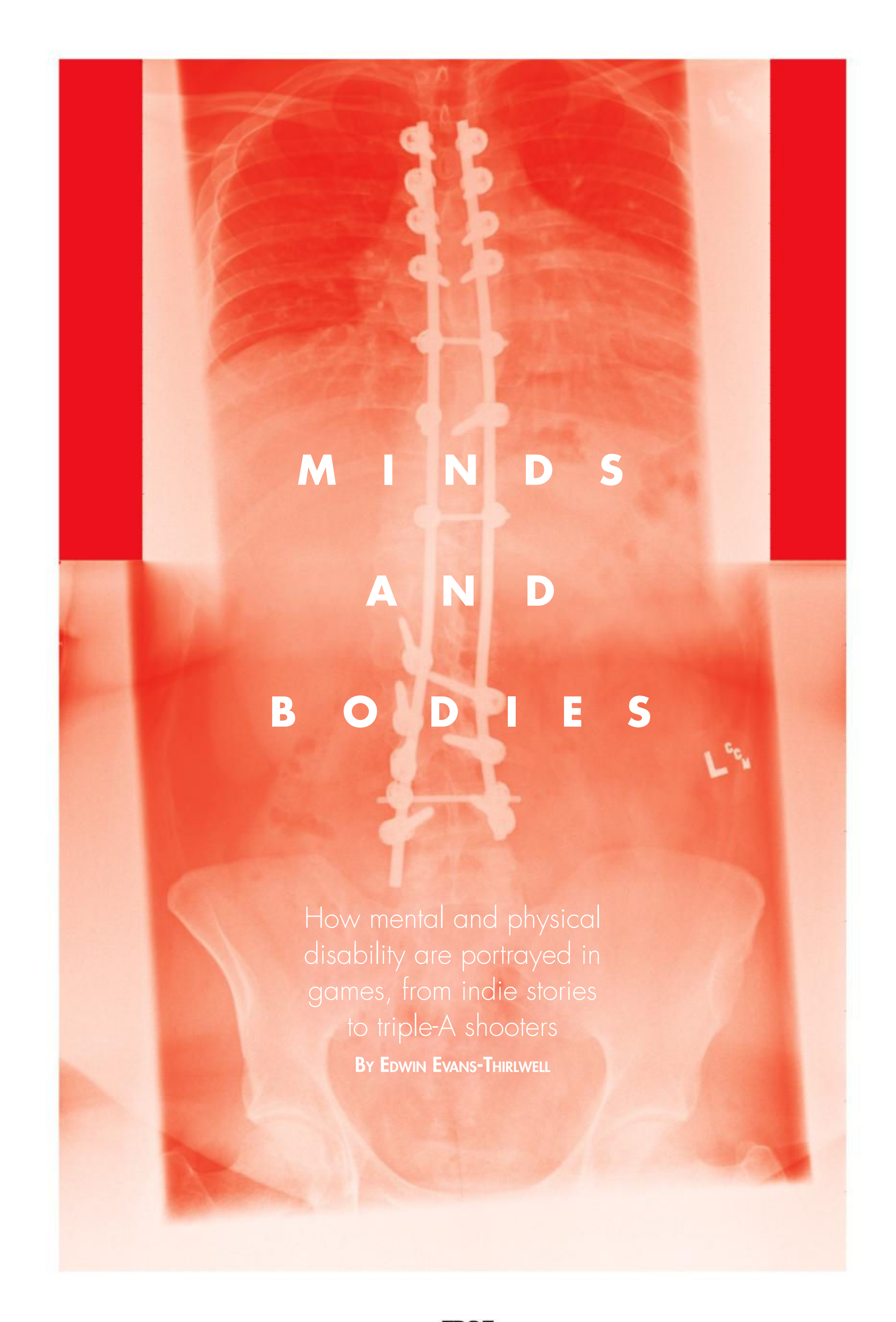
But while almost everything about developing *Sea Of Thieves* has required a bold new direction, the studio knew that it had to be, at its heart, identifiably a Rare game. Indeed, 'What makes a Rare game?' was the first question Chapman put to the team at the beginning of the project. "Everyone had subtly different answers, but a lot were around the idea that Rare's not afraid of doing new things. Our history is a great testament to that: there are platformers, racing games, firstperson shooters – there's this great heritage of doing something new and different. So in many ways, I think *Sea Of Thieves* is just a return to *that*." It's a continuation, too, of creating something that truly reflects its makers. "In Rare games of old, there was always that sense of humour imprinted on it by the developer," Chapman says. "In *Sea Of Thieves*, that's alive and well, but we give players the tools to make their own humour." If *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was a gag reel, *Sea Of Thieves* is improv comedy.

Whether it's a Monty Python-esque moment in which an earnest player attempts to 'take us prisoner', as we explain through fits of laughter that there's no 'hands up' emote and sit cross-legged instead, peering down our crewmate's spyglass while they're scoping out a distant cave, or getting drunk on grog and playing a wonky Ride Of The Valkyries on the hurdy-gurdy as our crewmates chase down another ship, *Sea Of Thieves* could not feel more like the Rare games of old: rebellious, a little risky, and silly in all the right places. But this time, there are no gates, and no guard dogs: Rare is inviting players to make of it what they will, and if *Sea Of Thieves* succeeds, it will be on the strength of that and that alone. "You'll only ever really find success when you get out of the comfort zone," Timmins says. "Rare has had a massive, successful history, but to have a massively successful future as well, sometimes you do have to evolve and change, otherwise you'll just get left behind." He gestures to a life-size statue of Banjo. "I love that this studio is full of nostalgia. But we're super forward-facing in our direction and where we want to be. I think that's the perfect mix. *Rare Replay* was like the nice bookend of that 30-year chapter, and then we're like, 'Right, the next 30 years – let's go.'" ■

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MINDS AND BODIES

How mental and physical disability are portrayed in games, from indie stories to triple-A shooters

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

All The Dead Bones is game about suffering as seen through the eyes of other people, a memoir of growing up with a severe spinal deformity that keeps its audience at a pointed remove. Written mostly in the secondperson, the game forces the player to occupy a range of uncomfortable perspectives with regard to its writer and designer, Owl Cave CEO **Olivia White**: a stranger hurling abuse in a park, a catastrophically self-satisfied surgeon, a distracted shopper, a surgical rod. "Basically, I didn't want players to play as me," White tells us. "My experiences were my own – and all the incidents in *All The Dead Bones* happened – and since part of the plot revolves around my feelings of alienation, I didn't want to give people the impression that they were able to 'get into my head' so to speak, or experience things how I did, because they simply don't have the disability and chronic pain to go with it.

"It should be mentioned that this game was very much made for non-disabled people. Other disabled people will have their own *Dead Bones* stories. I just didn't think it'd work as effectively asking a non-disabled person to empathise with what I went through. I also wanted to make the point that anyone can be dismissive, thoughtless or bigoted towards disability. I think it's ingrained in humanity to be scared by disability, and I wanted people to analyse themselves, and consider times when they may have lived the roles they were filling in the game." ▶

Based in southern England, White is one of a growing number of developers who are engaging explicitly with the question of disability in their games, investigating the opportunities of an artform that remains dominated by power fantasies and lurid caricatures of mental and physical illness. Her other projects include *The Charnel House Trilogy*, a macabre point-and-click adventure set during a fateful overnight train journey and the post-apocalyptic adventure *Richard And Alice*; beyond games, she has also written a collection of horror stories, Bright Lights And Glass Houses, and is a content manager for the NoSleep horror-fiction podcast. White's professional interest in horror creates an intriguing tension, given the genre's often theatrical and denigratory treatment of mental and physical illness. "It's a tricky thing, this," she says. "Some people would say that horror shouldn't involve mental illness at all, and as someone with a personality disorder, I strongly disagree with that. So much of my horror writing serves as catharsis for me, and ultimately a lot of mental illnesses are horrifying and scary, and I think someone like me should be able to explore those things within their chosen genre.

"That said, I absolutely hate it when mental illness is the source of the horror; it's usually cheap, tacky and exploitative. The tropes of 'crazy person in an asylum having delusions that kill people' or 'the schizophrenic murderer' are so overused, and usually highly inaccurate. It seems to be open season on depicting mental illness in thoughtless ways in horror." Horror fiction fares even worse when it comes to depictions of physical disability, White adds. "So many slasher killers [in these stories] kill because they're disfigured from birth or in a horrific accident, and then their appearances are used as a source of horror. You very, very rarely get a physically disabled character in a horror story who isn't the villain." In her own work, White avoids diagnosing her characters or reducing their behaviour to a mental or physical disability. "Whatever Rob in *Sepulchre* may have wrong with him, for example, the evil acts he commits are due to the influence of the supernatural, and I don't want to muddy the waters by implying it's a mental-health thing."

Boston, US-based independent The Deep End Games has also wrestled with the association of disability with horror. The studio's debut release *Perception* (recently ported to Switch) casts you as a blind woman, Cassie, exploring a mysterious old house she recalls from her dreams. The game draws on director and Irrational Games veteran Bill Gardner's postgraduate research into technology for those with impaired sight, and is built around the concept of echolocation, to which its creators were introduced by Daniel Kish, head of World Access For The Blind. Players navigate by tapping Cassie's cane on surfaces to briefly illuminate nearby parts of the house, much as some people with impaired sight navigate by listening to how sounds are altered by the environment. It isn't always safe to make a noise, however, as a buzzing insectile entity comes to haunt Cassie's footsteps, obliging you to retrace your steps by memory in certain areas to avoid detection.

One might read the game as merely linking blindness with fear and insecurity, but *Perception*'s writer and producer **Amanda Gardner** argues that the game is fundamentally "about showing how Cassie is empowered and in control, despite being put in a situation where most people would be petrified. She's brave, sarcastic, and completely self-aware. The horror of the game centres around what happened to the previous victims of the house, while Cassie is a brave heroine who happens to be blind. Just because sighted people view being blind as terrifying, doesn't mean that it is to blind people. That's part of the stereotype we're trying to shatter. One blind person we interviewed said something that really stuck with us: 'We're all temporarily abled'. Blind people are not walking around being terrified. Sighted people are walking around being terrified of losing their sight."

Its visual recreation of echolocation aside, *Perception* also shows how a person with impaired sight might use technology to read their surroundings. Cassie is able to call a sighted person to assist with tasks via her phone camera using the 'Friendly Eyes' app, a variation on the real 'Be My Eyes' app. This ludic engagement with everyday practicalities contrasts the sensational role played by disability aids in blockbusters such as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* or *Call Of Duty: Black Ops 3*, where protagonists are endowed with bionic limbs and enhancements. "The disability power fantasy is the one area where games frequently do represent disability," White says. "*Metal Gear Solid V*, *Bionic Commando*, *The Surge* – all sorts of games feature it. But they're rarely making much of a commentary on disability; rather, the disability serves as an explanation of why that character was able to be 'upgraded', so to speak." ▶

ACCESS ALL AREAS

One way to improve how videogames portray disability would be to facilitate more discussions between those who have a disability and those who don't. Olivia White observes that the industry could do a lot more to help developers with disabilities attend events and meet-ups. "Even shows and expos that want to present talks on disability representation and accessibility frequently get it wrong. There are basically never accommodations made for disabled developers or journalists to take part remotely, nor do many of the events make it clear how disability-friendly a venue is, and in general there's just not that much awareness amongst the folks who work in the industry, particularly the indie dev scene. If you can't go to all the events and parties then you often get totally overlooked, and it'd be nice if people made a little more effort to include disabled folk with the drive and passion to be involved, but who lack the physical ability to always do so."

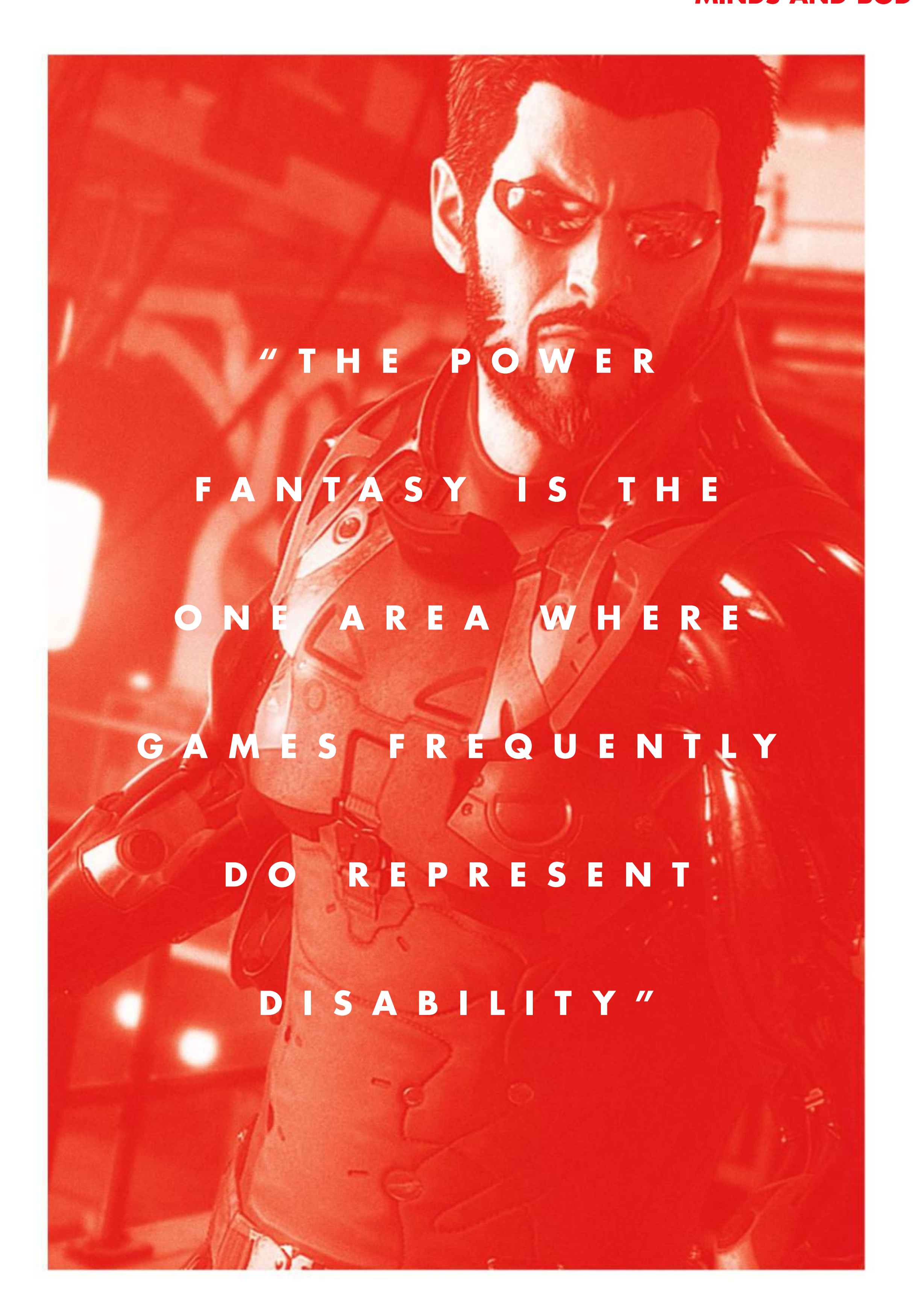


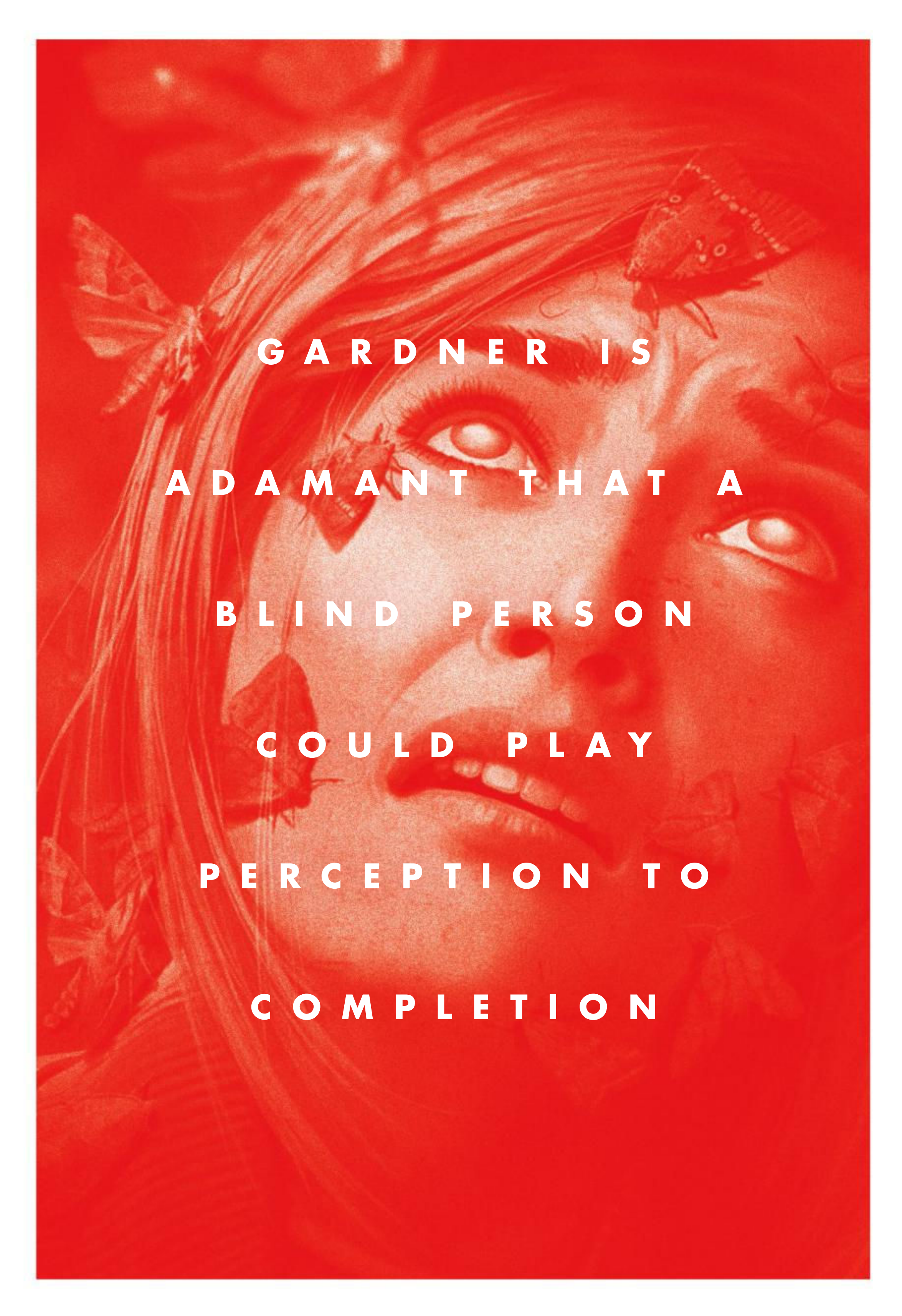


Owl Cave CEO Olivia White (top) and Amanda Gardner, co-founder, Deep End Games



"You have no choice here. You have to say something." *All The Dead Bones* often invokes the absence of choice to remind its reader of times when they might have chosen differently


"THE POWER FANTASY IS THE ONE AREA WHERE GAMES FREQUENTLY DO REPRESENT DISABILITY"


GARDNER IS
ADAMANT THAT A
BLIND PERSON
COULD PLAY
PERCEPTION TO
COMPLETION

"We were really excited to add those features to the game, because a lot of people don't realise what resources are out there for the blind," Gardner says. "But you know what we found? There is no prescribed path. I partly expected every blind person we spoke with to use iPhones with accessibility modes turned on. I expected extensive use of Jawbone, a speech-recognition software. I guess we sort of expected a roadmap. In reality, everyone we met with had their own methods that worked best for them. This inspired us. It gave us the confidence to move ahead with the idea that there is no right or wrong way forward."

Where White's *All The Dead Bones* confronts ableism in society, *Perception* also ties its exploration of blindness to a cultural history of misogyny, particularly in the North American medical profession. In a nod to Bill Gardner's work on the *Bioshock* series, Cassie is able to recall the memories of previous occupants of the house as audio diaries, among them the account of a woman who is medicated by her doctor husband. "*Perception* is about anyone who's been told 'no'," Gardner says. "It's not only the blind protagonist; it's the women of the mansion who have been manipulated, oppressed and murdered just for being born female. It's about the experience of not being believed, or believed in. It's about being drugged because you're 'hysterical', it's about being denied because you're not considered strong enough, it's about having less agency because you are a disabled female, and it's about a man being able to commandeer your land because your husband died and you can easily be labelled a danger to society."

This broadening of focus has, perhaps, come at the cost of investigating insidious cases of prejudice against the partially sighted or blind. "One of the common threads we noticed in our interviews was a frustration with the more subtle biases of sighted people," Gardner says. "We wrote and partially implemented a number of flashbacks in which Cassie interacts with people who have these preconceived notions of what she should or shouldn't do. One was focused around Cassie's career as a sculptor, and the sort of confused reaction she received as a blind artist. The flashbacks ended up being cut for a number of reasons, but mainly we found that the players 'bought into' Cassie and her story and the flashbacks seemed superfluous and distracting from the main thrust of the narrative."

More significantly, *Perception* compromises on navigation, allowing you to magically view narrative waypoints and hiding spots through intervening objects. It speaks to the difficulty of portraying such conditions faithfully in a work of commercial entertainment, where a certain level of accessibility and clarity is expected. For all that, Gardner is adamant that a blind person could play the game to completion, though this isn't officially supported in the design. "We did have requests to make the game blind-accessible from fairly early on. We had been working with a company that had incredible sound-spatialisation tech as part of one attempt to assist in blind playthroughs. Unfortunately, the company was bought out midway through our implementation and we couldn't use the tech. It's something we've continued to explore throughout development and in the time since launch, but have not found solutions we're happy with."



Though still intended for a fully sighted audience, the latest version of *Perception* includes options for players with impaired vision; these settings include resizable and coloured subtitles

RETHINKING ROLE-PLAY

To set some kind of quota for representations of disability obviously carries the risk of tokenism. Special Effect ambassador and Flipbook Productions director Mohammed Hossain says that it would be "great" to see more representations of disability in games with large casts, but feels there needs to be a story justification. "Usually in RPGs you can select a few different characters, but these are usually from the point of view of an able-bodied person," says Hossain, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. "I think it would be really interesting to see other kinds of representation, and the possibility of a role for a person with a disability, whether it be physical or mental, but I think it goes back to the narrative." One example of an ensemble RPG series that attempts to represent mental disability could be *Dragon Age*, which includes companion characters who display symptoms of bipolar disorder, mania and autism. These characters have attracted divided reactions from players affected by these conditions, and *Dragon Age*'s writers have shied away from discussing them.



Jens Matthies, creative director and co-founder, MachineGames

The problem of how to constructively depict disability in a work of entertainment is integral to *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus*, alt-history shooters that often play like a drunken, half-intended spoof of shooters in general. Unlike the other games in this feature, *Wolfenstein*'s portrayals of disability are grounded in neither firsthand experience nor scientific research, and have obvious shortcomings. Set in an ostentatiously deranged 1960s milieu where the Nazis won World War II using gadgets stolen from a secret Jewish order, the games deal largely in caricatures such as Max Hass, a stereotypical 'gentle giant' with a childish demeanour and impaired speech due to a severe brain injury. MachineGames often treats disability as a crude plot gimmick: there is a character with a mental health disorder in *The New Colossus*, for example, who exists to facilitate a quest in which you must deal with an outbreak of violent paranoia.

Creative director **Jens Matthies** is upfront about the portrayal's shallowness. "It could be as simple as the silhouette of his head," he says of the origin of Max Hass. "It could be just having a vision of this guy with half his head missing, which in turn might be because I read some newspaper article about a real person." Of Caroline Becker, a resistance leader who in *The New Order* uses a wheelchair, he says: "We just thought it would be ▶

cool to have what is perhaps the mentally strongest person in the team have a significant physical disability. That kind of juxtaposition is always interesting." If individual characterisations are in poor taste, the *Wolfenstein* games do, at least, express disability as commonplace and unromantic where other games ignore or fetishise it. "I think a lot of writers think that, because this character is so different from me, I have to approach them as though they were an alien," Matthies comments. "Now, what do aliens do? Let's research. OK, aliens do *this*, so now my character does *that*." MachineGames, he says, takes a less clinical and more sympathetic tack: "We try to write them as intimately as we would write the story of ourselves".

The games also serve as useful, somewhat self-aware illustrations of the difficulty of telling stories about disability in the context of a big-budget shooter, in which players are generally tacit superhumans who grow steadily more capable as the narrative unfolds. "You take the inconvenience out of able-bodied experiences in these games as well," Matthies notes. "It's not like in every game you have to go to the bathroom, or you have to sleep, or eat, all of that stuff. A lot of the everyday minutiae is removed from most games, and perhaps the most important element is speed and conditioning." In that context, developer MachineGames' decision to begin *The New Colossus* with a paraplegic BJ Blazkowicz fighting from a wheelchair is quite the departure, though this initial disempowerment is soon forgotten in a wave of weapon mods and ability upgrades, peaking in a brand-new, vat-grown body.

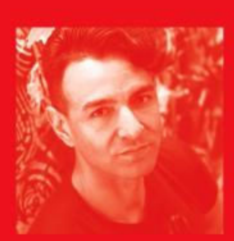
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is a rather more sustained and elaborate investigation of disability. The tale of a Celtic warrior on a quest to reclaim her lover's soul from Helheim, the Norse land of the dead, it combines familiar thirdperson action mechanics with a compromised but powerful recreation of psychosis, a mental-health condition which may involve visual and auditory hallucinations. The game began life as a more generic dark fantasy game loosely inspired by the character of Kai in Ninja Theory's 2007 action epic *Heavenly Sword*. "I said, 'What if Kai grew up, what would she see in the world, how would she interpret it?'" Ninja Theory co-founder and game director **Tameem Antoniades** tells us. "When you see her in *Heavenly Sword* she's talking to air, conversing with invisible entities. What if we could see them? And then I thought, well, people do experience that kind of thing. And I started looking into those experiences and I found it terrifying – I didn't realise that people felt such horror on a daily basis."

Hellblade is, in some ways, a dismantling and recuperation of pop-culture clichés about madness and delusion that are present in Ninja Theory's previous games. Its cinematic language is comparable to that of the studio's *Devil May Cry* reboot, made up of vivid apparitions and jarring environmental transformations, but where *DmC*'s direction can be traced to films such as Inception or They Live, *Hellblade* is based on discussions with neuroscientists at the University Of Cambridge and students at Recovery College East, an institution that provides long-term support for people with mental and physical disabilities. This has equipped Ninja Theory with a new understanding of such well-worn devices as the flashback. "One of the women we spoke to described what flashbacks were like for her, and they're not like you see in the movies, where you get a lot of quick cuts. It feels like the flashback is emerging around you, and it's fuzzy and unclear, and it can become clearer over time or less clear, but you get caught up in the flashback and you become part of it."

In turning a Celtic fantasy into an allegorical study of a serious mental illness, Antoniades and his team were obliged to confront many of their own prejudices and preconceptions. "I think that, like a lot of people, I didn't really understand what psychosis was," he concedes. "I knew it had to do with shaping reality, misinterpreting reality, but I wasn't sure about the connotations with violence, because 'psychopathy' is a very similar-sounding word, and once I understood that there's a very clear difference I was struck by how often the words are used interchangeably – in professional publications, in media, they're liberally conflated." To clarify, psychopathy is a more severe form of antisocial behavioural disorder that can lead to recklessness, violence or criminal activity. The game avoids suggesting that Senua's martial aptitude is a consequence of her psychosis, but in striving to reinvent cinematic clichés around mental illness rather than striking out afresh, it struggles with the legacy of misrepresentations in horror. ▶

SEX MATTERS

Nowhere is bodily or mental disability being more heavily policed by society than in sex and sexuality. People with disabilities are often tacitly assumed to be sexless, a prejudice that Olivia White's games strive to resist. "I suffer from a lot of complex sexual anxiety and a difficult relationship with my body thanks to my disability – my spine used to be very visibly deformed – so it's a fascinating subject for me," she says. "Disabled people are so frequently assumed to have no sexual identity when the truth is we're sexual beings just as much as anyone else. Dealing with these subjects in my work lets me work through my own issues with these things, and how society presents them compared to my relationship with them." White observes that games typically "shy away" from depictions of sex, despite it being a fact of life: her creations respond to this as much as to the refusal to conciliate that people with disabilities have desires. "I think my insight from having my disability allows me to approach sex and nudity in my work from a slightly different, more analytical perspective."

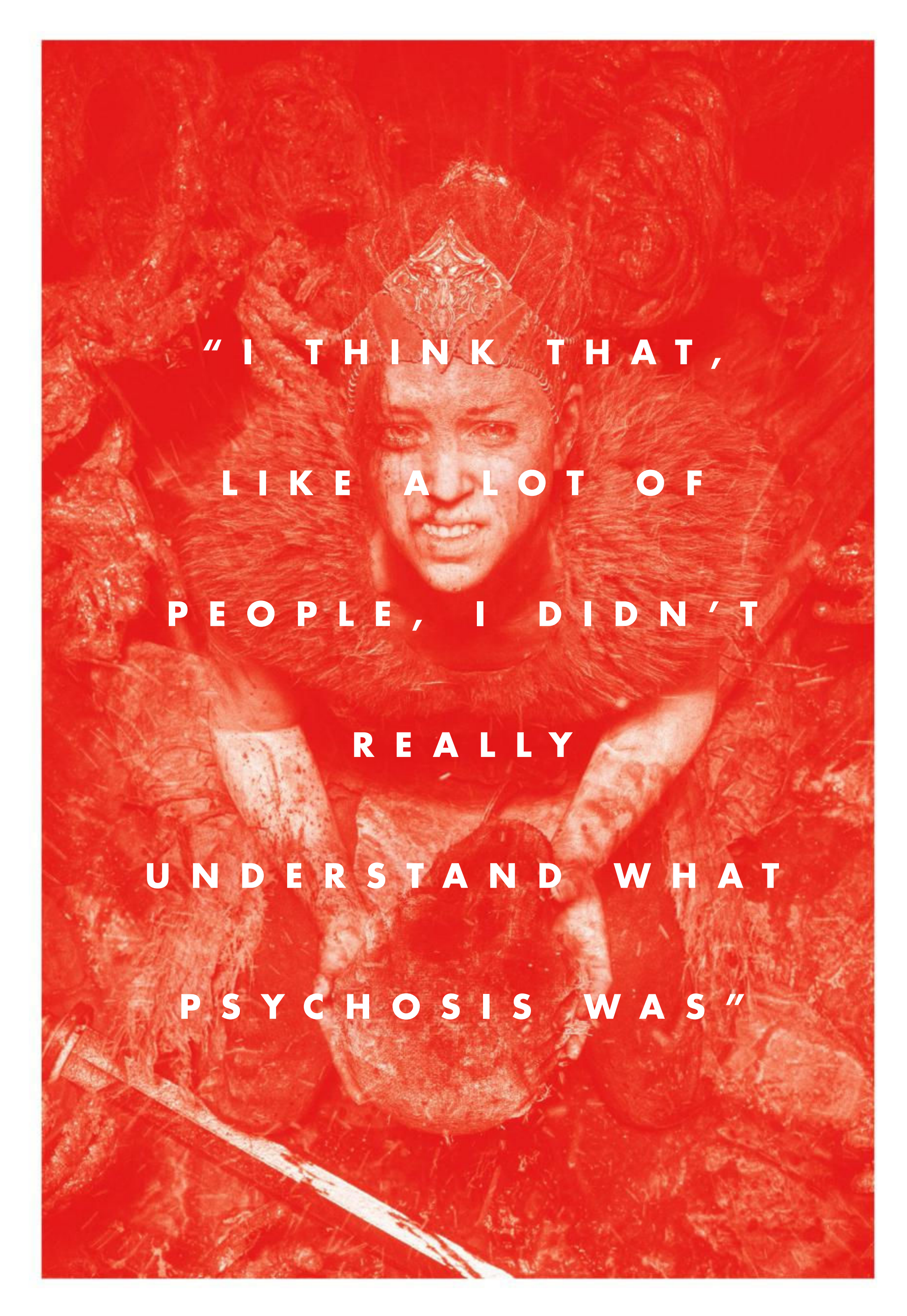


Tameem Antoniades, creative director, Ninja Theory



According to designer Jakob Ericsson, the wheelchair-combat elements of *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus* were inspired by watching videos of people using their wheelchairs in skateparks


"I CAN'T PLAY [LIMB-MOVEMENT SIMULATOR] QWOP AT ALL WITHOUT HAVING A PANIC ATTACK"


"I THINK THAT,
LIKE A LOT OF
PEOPLE, I DIDN'T
REALLY
UNDERSTAND WHAT
PSYCHOSIS WAS"



Tameem Antoniades argues that players are more open to learning about psychosis in a historical fantasy game such as *Hellblade* than they would be if it were one that was set in modern times

"At no point did I think it was horror," Antoniades comments. "It was only when we started showing the game to people that I started to say, 'Wow, this is a horror game. It wasn't the intention, but that's clearly how it's coming across.'"

Senua is accompanied on her journey through Helheim by a number of voices, named in the credits as the Furies in apparent reference to the avenging Erinyes of Greek legend. As you explore the game's windswept islands, fight skull-masked spectres and solve simple visual puzzles, these voices encourage and berate, guide and mock. Some voices assume the visible guise of figures from her past, and occasionally, Senua addresses the player as though speaking to one of these people, briefly making eye contact while the camera circles her. These interactions are, again, all based on personal accounts of psychosis. "They wouldn't necessarily call them voices," Antoniades explains. "They would name them, because some of these characters that live in their heads are full-blown characters they've known since childhood, with developed personalities, some of whom they would call friends, some of whom they would call bullies – some of whom are little fragments like the Furies, while others are fully developed characters."

Senua treating the player as one of her voices is designed to reveal something of the complexity of our mental lives generally, Antoniades suggests. "I think we have all kinds of characters who live in our heads, some based on people we've known, a parent or a tutor or whatever, and the only thing that separates us from people with psychosis who hear voices is that we encompass those voices within our sense of self, and when they're not within your sense of self they appear external. And it applies not just to characters, it applies to things we do – when we drive, a different part of our brain drives the car while we think about other things. And so you, as a viewer, as a player, are performing a function. You're the part of her that's driving her physically through the world, but you're still part of her."

DEFINING DISABILITY

As a legal term and in common usage, 'disability' has been made to cover a wide range of very different conditions. Could the broadness of the term be counterproductive, or is it useful to treat many kinds of people under one label? "I much prefer the word 'disability' to the word 'disabled' as even though it is a broad definition I feel like it is one that is more accurate," comments Flipbook Productions director Mohammed Hossain. "I feel like the word 'disabled' is a bit more demeaning, as technically it means you are not functioning, whereas to 'have a disability' still means that you can function and be the same person as it were. This was one of my campaigns at university." Olivia White argues that while it's important that people understand the difference between disabilities, the term 'disability' remains useful. "It's blunt, up front, and it's something that a lot of non-disabled people have tried to change over the years, deciding it's 'offensive' and preferring things like 'differently-abled'. This is nonsense. My disability is a disability. It's a disadvantage. It holds me back. Pretending otherwise just prevents me from getting the support I need."

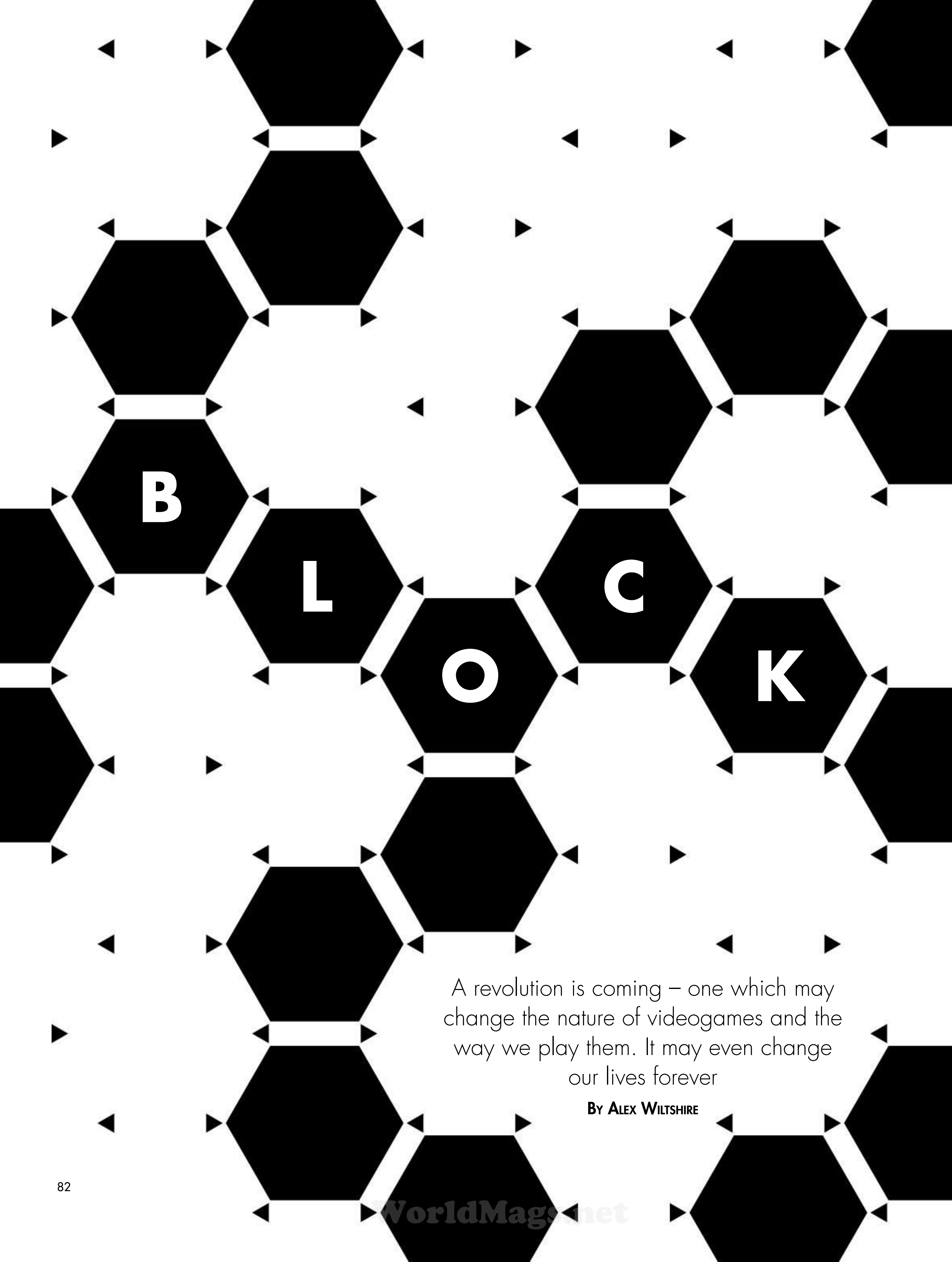


Mohammed Hossain, director and developer, Flipbook Productions

However well-intentioned, *Hellblade* walks an uneven line between psychological study and escapist fable. As a classical hero's journey that follows a straightforward pattern of crisis and revelation, it is ill-equipped to investigate the more mundane details of a condition like psychosis. It can also reduce the symptoms of psychosis to a set of interfacial tools: during combat, for example, Senua's hallucinations may alert you to incoming attacks, or clue you in on enemy weaknesses. More positively, its story explores how the trauma of a mental illness may have much to do with how sufferers are abused or neglected as the symptoms of the condition itself. If Senua's characterisation of psychosis as a 'curse' or 'darkness' might seem to perpetuate harmful clichés, the game also reveals how this characterisation arises from the beliefs and judgements of those around her.

Both White and Gardner feel that game developers are still very hesitant to explore the topic of disability openly, though touch on it implicitly or unwittingly. Gardner argues that games are "pushing the boundaries right now of what's previously been taboo, such as disabilities, especially in the indie space" but finds prevailing standards of acceptability frustrating nonetheless. "One review of *Perception* said we shouldn't have hinted at sexual abuse, and that the topic didn't belong in games. Can you imagine making a comment like that now?" White, meanwhile, would like to see more games that represent disability without making it the butt of a joke. "I wrote a piece a few years back about how *Octodad* served as a great analogy for disability, and even though I discovered it wasn't the developer's intent, I'd cite that as an excellent example of making you think about those issues."

She adds, however, that playing games that are explicitly about disability can be traumatic for those living with it. "I can't play [browser-based limb movement simulator] *QWOP* at all without having a panic attack, remembering back to when I had to learn to walk again after spinal surgery. So while I'd like to see more representation along didactic lines, it's not something I personally want to engage with very often." White also suggests that developers don't necessarily need to make a point of analysing these conditions. At one level, it's a simple question of acknowledging that such people and their experiences exist – an area in which she feels the industry lags behind the often-vilified 'gamer' community. "What I would like to see is more disabled characters who are just... disabled because some people are disabled. NPCs in wheelchairs, or with walking aids, things like that. Because this is believable and, in the appropriate setting, anyway, makes for more believable world-building. It's something not many people seem to think of when it comes to representation." ■



BLOCK

A revolution is coming – one which may change the nature of videogames and the way we play them. It may even change our lives forever

By Alex Wiltshire


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David Lau-Kee, general partner, London Venture Partners

The blockchain is boring. Yes, it's the tech industry's latest obsession, a buzzword whose mere mention will send investors the globe over scurrying for their wallets. (A struggling drinks company saw its stock price almost triple after it changed its name from Long Island Iced Tea to Long Blockchain). But it's ultimately about databases on the internet, a deeply technical infrastructure which only engineers truly understand. Those that do get it will tell you that it's incredibly powerful. The blockchain is a complete revision of how databases work – and, since databases drive almost everything, it has the promise of changing how the world works in many ways.

The result is that blockchain is both difficult to understand, and feels a little dangerous. It's behind the rise of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum, which have risen in value so suddenly that their bubbles look as if they'll pop any day. It's behind the currently stratospheric prices of GPUs, as blockchain miners have rushed to cash in, building rigs with multiple graphics cards to extract money from the gold rush, consuming entire countries-worth of electricity as they go. It's behind fundraising campaigns which at best award investors with valueless currencies on the promise they will be worth something in the future if enough people believe in them, and at worst disappear with all their cash.

To outsiders, then, blockchain is a world in which nothing seems real, a Wild West of regulation-busting prospecting for fortunes by speculators, chancers and fraudsters. But to insiders, blockchain is so much more. It's a catalyst for a revolution, the bringer of a new world.

And now it's beginning to sweep videogames up with it.

"Blockchain is going to be transformative to the game industry," says **David Lau-Kee**, an investor at London Venture Partners, a VC firm which has previously backed the likes of Supercell, NaturalMotion and Unity. "I'm extremely bullish on what it can bring to the game sector as a whole." Lau-Kee has watched the rate at which blockchain-based business pitches come to him speed up from a trickle two years ago to a torrent today. He's had nearly 30 over the past couple of months, and while he can immediately dismiss most of them for being bad business ideas or simply scams, he feels that many have specific identifiable and measurable benefits to both players and the industry in general.

But there are already many blockchain-powered startups already running. Unikrn, which has high-profile backing from Hollywood actor Ashton Kutcher and celebrity investor Mark Cuban, offers its users the chance to bet on professional games of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *League Of Legends*, *Dota 2* and *Rocket League*. Firstblood is another betting platform which allows any player to enter tournaments in the hope of winning real prizes. Playkey uses blockchain to manage

WHAT IS THE BLOCKCHAIN?

The best way to start understanding the blockchain is to understand what it proposes to replace. Traditionally, transactions between people which require trust, such as financial transfers, have been conducted by trustworthy organisations like banks. In an imperfect world in which someone might run off with your money, banks have risen as institutions that can be relied on to ensure such transactions are carried out to the letter. These institutions, however, tend to be private, and the systems they use are out of the control of the people who rely on them.

Blockchain technology completely revolutionises the nature of making trustworthy transactions. A blockchain is a ledger: a record of transactions which is stored across many computers connected by the Internet. This decentralised nature means that no one owns a blockchain and anyone can use it, but it's also highly secure, using public-private key cryptography to ensure the identities of the people involved in any transaction. Each deal is stored on the blockchain in a block, and when made, many computers across the Internet verify it. No block can be changed unless all subsequent blocks are changed, thus requiring everyone in the blockchain to be involved in making a single amendment.

All these features are designed to ensure that everyone can agree that every piece of information in the blockchain is permanent and correct, and thus everyone can trust in it. An obvious first use for a blockchain was therefore in the foundation of new currencies that are free of the traditional banking system, hence the appearance of Bitcoin in 2009. The blockchain that powers Bitcoin was just the first expression of the core technology; another key one is Ethereum, which generates the cryptocurrency Ether. Open-source, these two leading instances of the blockchain concept have spurred many separate offshoots.

Cryptocurrencies are just one use of blockchains, though currencies are built into them as a way of encouraging early adopters to jump into supporting a new blockchain by creating the network that would allow them to function and repaying them for allowing their computers to be used to perform the complex calculations that go into verifying every transaction.

Beyond cryptocurrencies, the blockchain also has great application for storing information about identity, taking control of information about who we are and what we have away from private companies. Think, for example, about Steam, Xbox Live and PSN, which record what games you own, how far you've progressed in them, and who you're friends with. Your data is locked into those private networks, so if you buy an Xbox One, you can't import your PlayStation friends list, or any of your games or the Trophies you've won, unless Sony allows it. Which would seem unlikely. Although the data companies store is about you, it's not yours; you simply get to see and use some of it, and always on their terms.

Were that data stored on a blockchain, however, it would be both inalienably yours and transportable to any service which can read it. And since it's decentralised, if the company which established it goes out of business, the information remains intact and accessible. Ask yourself how this works with the legal ownership of games, and why Sony would want information about their customers to be stored in a form outside their control, and, well, you begin to understand some of the issues that the blockchain's many freedoms are posing.

peer-to-peer game streaming while also building a network of blockchain miners on gaming PCs. Many startups are founding new cryptocurrencies to raise funds, creating value out of pure business ideas. Jon 'Neverdie' Jacobs, the *Entropia Universe* player who sold a virtual asteroid for $635,000 in 2010, has integrated the Neverdie Coin into the *Entropia Universe* so it can be earned and traded.

"The blockchain's advantages are unlimited. Like the internet in the early days, we see unlimited potential," **Brian Fargo** tells us. Previously founder of developer/publishers Interplay and inXile, Fargo is now throwing his weight behind Robot Cache, a digital-game marketplace based on the blockchain. "We are only scratching the surface with Robot Cache. I love technology and finding ways to connect the dots to create something new, and the blockchain reminded me of the feelings I had when I first became knowledgeable of the Internet."

Hilmar Pétursson
CEO, CCP

For **Hilmar Pétursson**, CEO of *Eve Online* maker CCP, the blockchain is entirely complementary to the values that *Eve* is built upon: empowering players, and building a universe that's defined by their actions. "I believe an economy built on the blockchain is a more valuable economy than one implemented on a proprietary database, and it also opens up the idea that people can truly own their assets," he says. For Pétursson, the blockchain could bring about a revolution in the relationship players have with in-game items and assets, breaking down the boundary between the nature of physical and digital objects. ▶



THE FLEXIBILITY THAT BLOCKCHAIN AFFORDS IS ENABLED BY THE FACT THAT IT'S TRANSPARENT

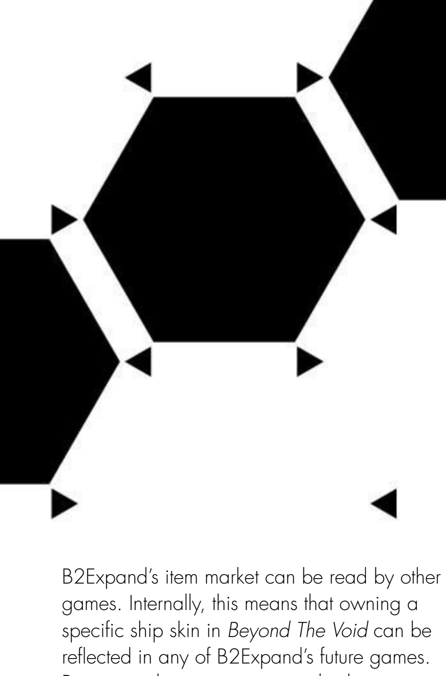
In January 2018, in Lyon, France, a young company named B2Expand moved into a new office to accommodate its rapidly growing staff. It had released its first game, *Beyond The Void*, in Steam Early Access the previous September. A one-on-one RTS set in space, *Beyond The Void* incorporates an economy and player account system that's run on an Ethereum-based blockchain. Two years ago, however, the whole company was just a one-man indie project made by concept artist Maxence Burgel. But then his brother, Eric, heard about a new game built on the Bitcoin blockchain, *Spells Of Genesis*. This mobile trading-card game, developed by Switzerland-based EverdreamSoft, uses a blockchain to manage its trading economy. If you own a card in the game, you own it, rather than EverdreamSoft. You're free to trade it for other cards and for real money, completely outside EverdreamSoft's control.

Excited by the concept, Eric encouraged Maxence to incorporate the blockchain into his game, and needing someone to develop an Ethereum-based blockchain infrastructure, they brought in Eric's son, Rémi. "It was a really new idea, a new concept that we really liked," says **Manon Burgel**, Eric's daughter and sister to Rémi, who joined to work on marketing and communications. Their concept was to make a series of different games, all to be built with the blockchain providing the backbone for their economies, with *Beyond The Void* being the first.

As in *Spells Of Genesis*, B2Expand's blockchain stores players' inventories, such as avatars and ship skins, whether earned through play or bought from B2Expand's official shop using its own cryptocurrency, Nexium. "We can offer players true ownership of what they're buying," Manon says. "It's not controlled by us. They can trade it back and forth without commission and they have complete control." That's true whether players use B2Expand's storefront, or if they've been enterprising enough to build their own store to interface with B2Expand's blockchain. And since Nexium can be converted into other currencies, these items have real monetary value.

The flexibility that blockchain affords is enabled by the fact that it's transparent, which is to say that it allows everyone to see transactions made on it. This means

Manon Burgel, head of communications and marketing, B2Expand



B2Expand's item market can be read by other games. Internally, this means that owning a specific ship skin in *Beyond The Void* can be reflected in any of B2Expand's future games. But it can also appear in completely separate titles made by other companies. Not the actual skin, mind you; that's still subject to the fact that B2Expand owns its IP. But if *Spells Of Genesis* detects that a player has in their wallet a crystal ship skin from *Beyond The Void*, it unlocks a corresponding crystal-based card. This interplay doesn't require a deal between the two developers, or any special functionality, other than the ability to read the blockchain.

This concept of real ownership and transparency is extremely powerful. Through it, in-game items become transportable, lending them a permanence that transcends the game in which they originated. Imagine if the skins, emotes, items and achievements that you've earned or bought in *Overwatch* and *World Of Warcraft* could have applications beyond Battlenet. Blizzard has given limited access to these inventories, but if it closes a game or goes out of business, no player can guarantee they can hold on to them. "Owning, in an undisputed way, an item on a blockchain – this has never been done before," CCP's Pétursson says. "It's never been possible to ascribe ownership in such a strong way before, not even with physical ownership."

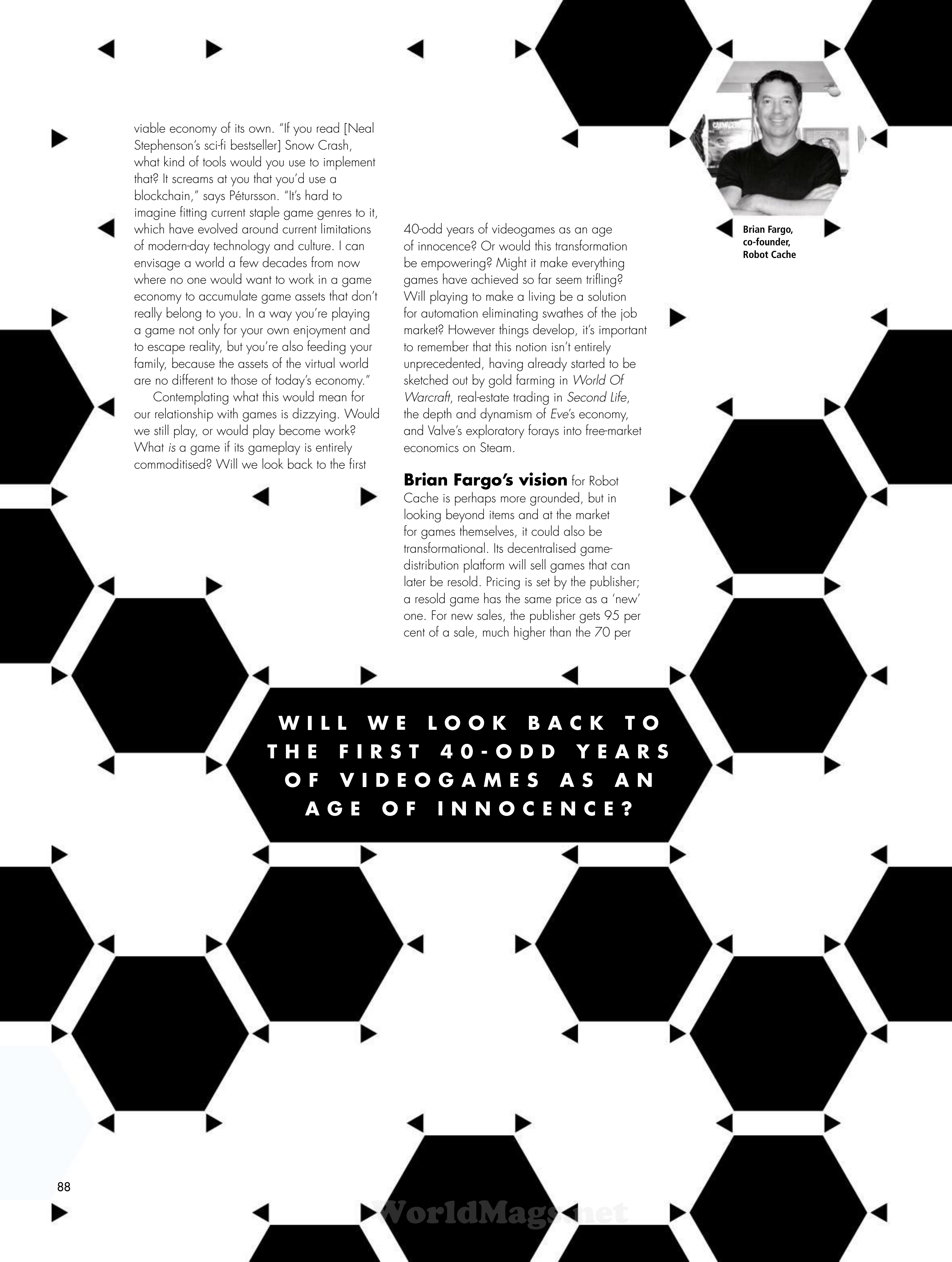
It has a formative name, 'cryptoproperty'. The term was coined by game developer Alex Amsel, whose company, Ownage, aims to provide an open marketplace for in-game items. He defines cryptoproperty as "Digital property in which cryptographic techniques are used to control issuance, ownership and transfer, independent of any centralised registry." Ownage is designed to plug into common platforms and engines such as Unity and Unreal, and to give developers a place where they can monetise their in-game assets and take advantage of cross-game marketing – all without any cost, because Ownage makes its money from transaction fees.

"This is what I think will be transformative for games," Lau-Kee says. "It's ownership of in-game digital assets, giving them tangibility – and therefore real-world value and provenance. It's hugely interesting. Game publishers worry about what happens with their assets being traded, but it happens anyway, right? But in a way that's outside the game." Trading knives from *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* is big business, especially considering the game's niche status and the limited access Valve gives its users to buy and sell digital goods and to convert them into real money.

It's difficult to know when to stop when projecting where cryptoproperty can take games. One place is the Metaverse, the idea of a shared and persistent virtual space which functions as a fully alternative world with a ▸

DEVELOPING ECONOMY

B2Expand is a developer that has shouldered the task of constructing an economy alongside its games, and its value is tied explicitly to the quality of those games. The more people who play them and buy things from B2Expand's store then the stronger its economy, founded on its Nexium cryptocurrency, becomes. And yet the studio destroys half of all the revenue it makes on purchases as a measure to prevent Nexium devaluing as a result of the overall supply of currency increasing as more people trade in it. If these two principles seem at odds, well, welcome to economics. Since B2Expand funded the studio with an ICO, it's anxious to ensure the value of Nexium its early investors own raises in value.



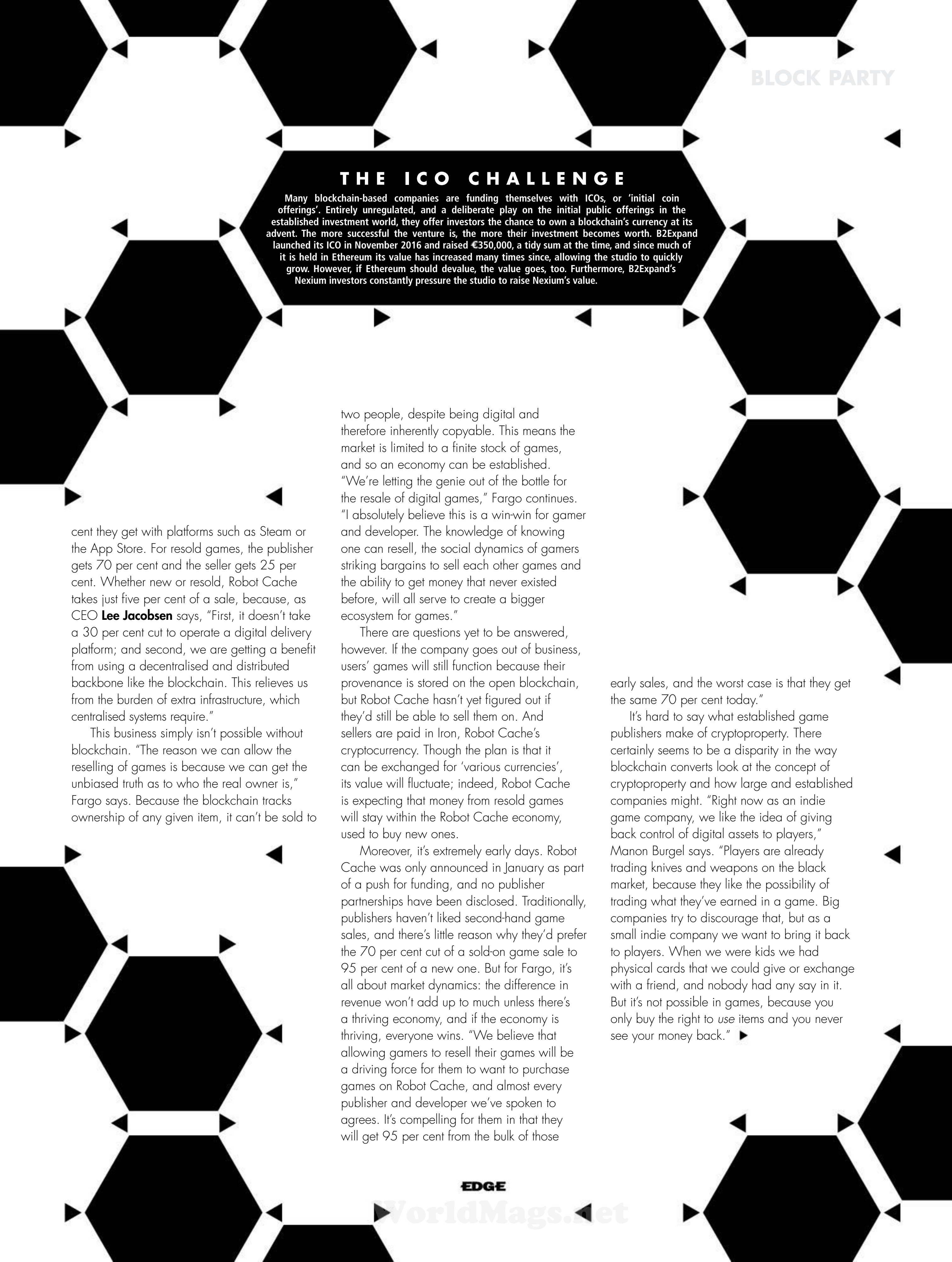
Brian Fargo, co-founder, Robot Cache

viable economy of its own. "If you read [Neal Stephenson's sci-fi bestseller] Snow Crash, what kind of tools would you use to implement that? It screams at you that you'd use a blockchain," says Pétursson. "It's hard to imagine fitting current staple game genres to it, which have evolved around current limitations of modern-day technology and culture. I can envisage a world a few decades from now where no one would want to work in a game economy to accumulate game assets that don't really belong to you. In a way you're playing a game not only for your own enjoyment and to escape reality, but you're also feeding your family, because the assets of the virtual world are no different to those of today's economy."

Contemplating what this would mean for our relationship with games is dizzying. Would we still play, or would play become work? What *is* a game if its gameplay is entirely commoditised? Will we look back to the first 40-odd years of videogames as an age of innocence? Or would this transformation be empowering? Might it make everything games have achieved so far seem trifling? Will playing to make a living be a solution for automation eliminating swathes of the job market? However things develop, it's important to remember that this notion isn't entirely unprecedented, having already started to be sketched out by gold farming in *World Of Warcraft*, real-estate trading in *Second Life*, the depth and dynamism of *Eve*'s economy, and Valve's exploratory forays into free-market economics on Steam.

Brian Fargo's vision for Robot Cache is perhaps more grounded, but in looking beyond items and at the market for games themselves, it could also be transformational. Its decentralised game-distribution platform will sell games that can later be resold. Pricing is set by the publisher; a resold game has the same price as a 'new' one. For new sales, the publisher gets 95 per cent of a sale, much higher than the 70 per

WILL WE LOOK BACK TO THE FIRST 40-ODD YEARS OF VIDEOGAMES AS AN AGE OF INNOCENCE?



THE ICO CHALLENGE

Many blockchain-based companies are funding themselves with ICOs, or 'initial coin offerings'. Entirely unregulated, and a deliberate play on the initial public offerings in the established investment world, they offer investors the chance to own a blockchain's currency at its advent. The more successful the venture is, the more their investment becomes worth. B2Expand launched its ICO in November 2016 and raised €350,000, a tidy sum at the time, and since much of it is held in Ethereum its value has increased many times since, allowing the studio to quickly grow. However, if Ethereum should devalue, the value goes, too. Furthermore, B2Expand's Nexium investors constantly pressure the studio to raise Nexium's value.

cent they get with platforms such as Steam or the App Store. For resold games, the publisher gets 70 per cent and the seller gets 25 per cent. Whether new or resold, Robot Cache takes just five per cent of a sale, because, as CEO **Lee Jacobsen** says, "First, it doesn't take a 30 per cent cut to operate a digital delivery platform; and second, we are getting a benefit from using a decentralised and distributed backbone like the blockchain. This relieves us from the burden of extra infrastructure, which centralised systems require."

This business simply isn't possible without blockchain. "The reason we can allow the reselling of games is because we can get the unbiased truth as to who the real owner is," Fargo says. Because the blockchain tracks ownership of any given item, it can't be sold to two people, despite being digital and therefore inherently copyable. This means the market is limited to a finite stock of games, and so an economy can be established. "We're letting the genie out of the bottle for the resale of digital games," Fargo continues. "I absolutely believe this is a win-win for gamer and developer. The knowledge of knowing one can resell, the social dynamics of gamers striking bargains to sell each other games and the ability to get money that never existed before, will all serve to create a bigger ecosystem for games."

There are questions yet to be answered, however. If the company goes out of business, users' games will still function because their provenance is stored on the open blockchain, but Robot Cache hasn't yet figured out if they'd still be able to sell them on. And sellers are paid in Iron, Robot Cache's cryptocurrency. Though the plan is that it can be exchanged for 'various currencies', its value will fluctuate; indeed, Robot Cache is expecting that money from resold games will stay within the Robot Cache economy, used to buy new ones.

Moreover, it's extremely early days. Robot Cache was only announced in January as part of a push for funding, and no publisher partnerships have been disclosed. Traditionally, publishers haven't liked second-hand game sales, and there's little reason why they'd prefer the 70 per cent cut of a sold-on game sale to 95 per cent of a new one. But for Fargo, it's all about market dynamics: the difference in revenue won't add up to much unless there's a thriving economy, and if the economy is thriving, everyone wins. "We believe that allowing gamers to resell their games will be a driving force for them to want to purchase games on Robot Cache, and almost every publisher and developer we've spoken to agrees. It's compelling for them in that they will get 95 per cent from the bulk of those early sales, and the worst case is that they get the same 70 per cent today."

It's hard to say what established game publishers make of cryptoproperty. There certainly seems to be a disparity in the way blockchain converts look at the concept of cryptoproperty and how large and established companies might. "Right now as an indie game company, we like the idea of giving back control of digital assets to players," Manon Burgel says. "Players are already trading knives and weapons on the black market, because they like the possibility of trading what they've earned in a game. Big companies try to discourage that, but as a small indie company we want to bring it back to players. When we were kids we had physical cards that we could give or exchange with a friend, and nobody had any say in it. But it's not possible in games, because you only buy the right to *use* items and you never see your money back." ▶



"I THINK BITCOIN WILL BE ADAPTED AND SYSTEMS WILL ACCOMMODATE IT"

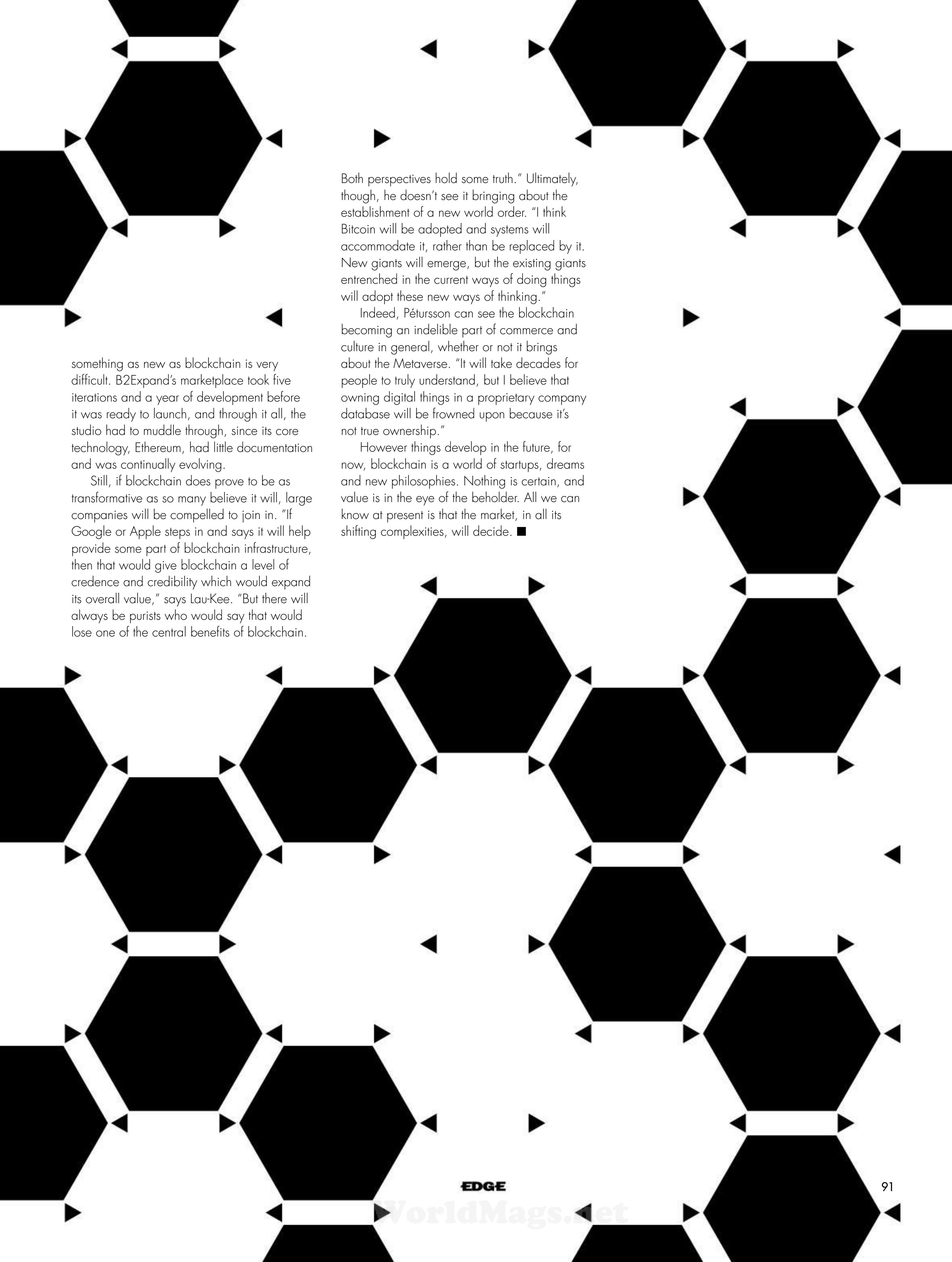
"It's really interesting to see if blockchain can bring convergence between digital and physical ownership," says **Jas Purewal** of Purewal & Partners, a legal firm specialising in digital entertainment. "But I don't see that it necessarily answers business, legal and policy factors which are at play. There has been, for a long time, an unanswered legal-policy debate about ownership of digital goods – whether it's possible to own them, and in what capacity. In the past, it often broke down because we couldn't be clear about what we meant by digital ownership. Does it mean you can deprive someone else of ownership? Does it mean you can take it into other games? Can you destroy it permanently? These are all possible with a physical item. Maybe, from a technical perspective, blockchain narrows the distinction between digital and physical goods, but it doesn't fundamentally answer what should be possible to do with digital items. And even if you can answer all those questions, what business need does it address?"

For Purewal, there isn't necessarily a demand in the industry for ownership. From Supercell to King, Blizzard to Valve, publishers and developers have established fortunes and huge player bases on the basis of the existing understanding of digital ownership. Why would they want to cede control? For the average *Candy Crush* or *Overwatch* player, do they want ownership, or do they simply want to play the game?

Still, in November, Ubisoft's incubator division, Station F, specifically called for entrepreneurs and startups to pitch it with ideas for blockchain businesses. Successful candidates would receive mentorship and office space to develop their ideas, and B2Expand were part of a previous round. Station F declined to explain to us what it's looking for and why, because the project is too early in development, but it's indicative of a general awareness among the biggest companies of the potential for blockchain in videogames.

And it poses a vital question: what will happen to the earliest adopters if and when the likes of Google, Microsoft, Sony, Ubisoft, Electronic Arts or Valve jump into this new space? "The risk is that big companies can easily crush small startups," Burgel concedes. But she argues that these companies are limited by their size. At the scale at which they operate, they have to make services and products that are perfect from their first launch. Startups can be nimble and develop more organically. And besides, working with

Jas Purewal, founder, Purewal & Partners



something as new as blockchain is very difficult. B2Expand's marketplace took five iterations and a year of development before it was ready to launch, and through it all, the studio had to muddle through, since its core technology, Ethereum, had little documentation and was continually evolving.

Still, if blockchain does prove to be as transformative as so many believe it will, large companies will be compelled to join in. "If Google or Apple steps in and says it will help provide some part of blockchain infrastructure, then that would give blockchain a level of credence and credibility which would expand its overall value," says Lau-Kee. "But there will always be purists who would say that would lose one of the central benefits of blockchain. Both perspectives hold some truth." Ultimately, though, he doesn't see it bringing about the establishment of a new world order. "I think Bitcoin will be adopted and systems will accommodate it, rather than be replaced by it. New giants will emerge, but the existing giants entrenched in the current ways of doing things will adopt these new ways of thinking."

Indeed, Pétursson can see the blockchain becoming an indelible part of commerce and culture in general, whether or not it brings about the Metaverse. "It will take decades for people to truly understand, but I believe that owning digital things in a proprietary company database will be frowned upon because it's not true ownership."

However things develop in the future, for now, blockchain is a world of startups, dreams and new philosophies. Nothing is certain, and value is in the eye of the beholder. All we can know at present is that the market, in all its shifting complexities, will decide. ■

THE MAKING OF...



PYRE

How Supergiant's third game found plenty of benefits to life on the Downside

By Chris Schilling

Format PC, PS4
Developer/publisher Supergiant Games
Origin US
Release 2017

Your journey through the Downside, *Pyre*'s colourful purgatory, is conducted at a trundling pace: you ride within a rattling, rickety caravan alongside a growing cast of fellow exiles, all cast out from the world above. By contrast, its own development began in something of a hurry. This wasn't so much down to pragmatic concerns as a keen desire to make a fresh start, Supergiant Games' writer-designer **Greg Kasavin** tells us. Shortly after its 2014 release, it was clear that the studio's second game, *Transistor*, was a hit; a team anxious to discover whether it could repeat the unprecedented success of its debut, 2011's isometric action-RPG *Bastion*, realised with delight that it was no one-hit wonder. But *Transistor* had taken longer than anticipated to make: three years in all, where *Bastion* was finished in less than two. "It was with a mix of relief and... 'urgency' isn't quite the word," Kasavin tells us. "But we were very eager to start on a new game once *Transistor* was done.

"As we self-fund our projects, our foremost goal is to make something worthwhile that does well enough for us to be able to go and make something new after that," he continues. Early indications were that *Transistor* had sold well enough for the 12-strong team to stick together, and so just two months after its launch, the first ideas for *Pyre* were already brewing within the studio. Which isn't to say that Supergiant had been planning ahead, however. "Many studios try to do that, and in a lot of ways, it's a responsible thing to do," Kasavin laughs. "For us it's a mix of pragmatism and a little bit of superstition that prevents us from doing that. Since we're a single-project studio, nothing matters more than the thing we're working on at any given moment. And as I'm sure you've heard other developers corroborate, the final weeks of development are some of the most vital. It's a time to not lose focus, and not get distracted by the grass being greener on the other side of the tough situation you're currently in."

Kasavin talks of each of Supergiant's games being a response of sorts to the previous one; as such, it was a conscious choice to paint on a grander canvas than before. "*Transistor* is an even more focused story than *Bastion*'s," he says. "It's this very specific little story about an episode in these characters' lives. So we were very drawn to making a game with a much larger cast of characters, because we so enjoy



Kasavin: "To me, the fantasy in *Pyre* was imagining a world where people are good to each other and trust each other"

character creation and world building. We said, 'Let's make a bigger game and see what that's like, even if it's just a matter of getting it out of our system'."

As with its games, the studio's process to starting a new project has been different every time. Yet despite having the same team in place, by Kasavin's own admission Supergiant hasn't

"PART OF MY RESPONSIBILITY IS TO LOOK FOR COMMON THEMES THAT CAN PULL IDEAS TOGETHER"

yet perfected its approach. "We don't know where the most important idea is going to come from, necessarily," he says. "Our experience is that those ideas just tend to flourish over time, and they're not immediately identifiable in all cases." So how does it all start? Does everyone gather in a room and spitball ideas? "It's close to that," he says. "At least that's how *Pyre* started. Our team doesn't have 'departments' – I'm the sole writer, Darren [Korb] is our sole composer, and we have one art director in Jen Zee, so people can speak directly to their own craft and just talk about the kind of thing they want to build, what sort of tone they're interested in. Part of my responsibility on the writing side, and to some extent the design side, is to look for common themes that can pull a lot of those ideas together."

The results so far seem to bear out the value of that approach, though Kasavin says with no little modesty that he doesn't consider the studio's games as experimental "by any stretch of the imagination". But they're not exactly straightforward genre pieces either. "They're somewhere in between," he suggests. "We don't start from an existing template with our games, for better or worse. We take time to explore in different gameplay directions to see if there's anything there in terms of what we want to make." So in *Pyre*'s case, which came first, story or gameplay? "Actually, that question has a fairly straightforward answer for us, which is: gameplay does come first, end of story," he says. "However, the narrative theming is developed very closely in partnership with the gameplay prototyping, and that prototyping is done with at least a certain theme in mind – it may not be a specific story, but at least a general sense of direction as to how it may contribute to a meaningful experience."

This holistic approach finds its perfect expression in *Pyre*'s Rites: a kind of celestial competitive sport that plays out like a slow-paced twist on three-on-three basketball. These went through "an enormous amount" of iteration, Kasavin tells us, though on a fundamental level the finished version is remarkably similar to its initial concepts. "It was always a three-versus-three, semi-symmetrical framing, where there was always this object, the celestial orb, that one character at a time could possess," he says. "And there was always this concept of the auras that the characters can use both for offence and defence."

While these core elements remained from the very earliest stages, the Rites evolved in other ways – though the notion that these face-offs were part of an ancient ritual was established relatively early. "But there were very early prototype versions that were not about trying to extinguish an opponent's flame," he says. "It took us a while to get to the specific idea of the pyres themselves having to be extinguished as the victory condition, as opposed to maybe trying to fill a pot with some sort of substance on the opposite side." He laughs at the thought: "Certainly the end result is somewhat unusual in its own right, but we tried much stranger stuff before we finally got to where we did with it."

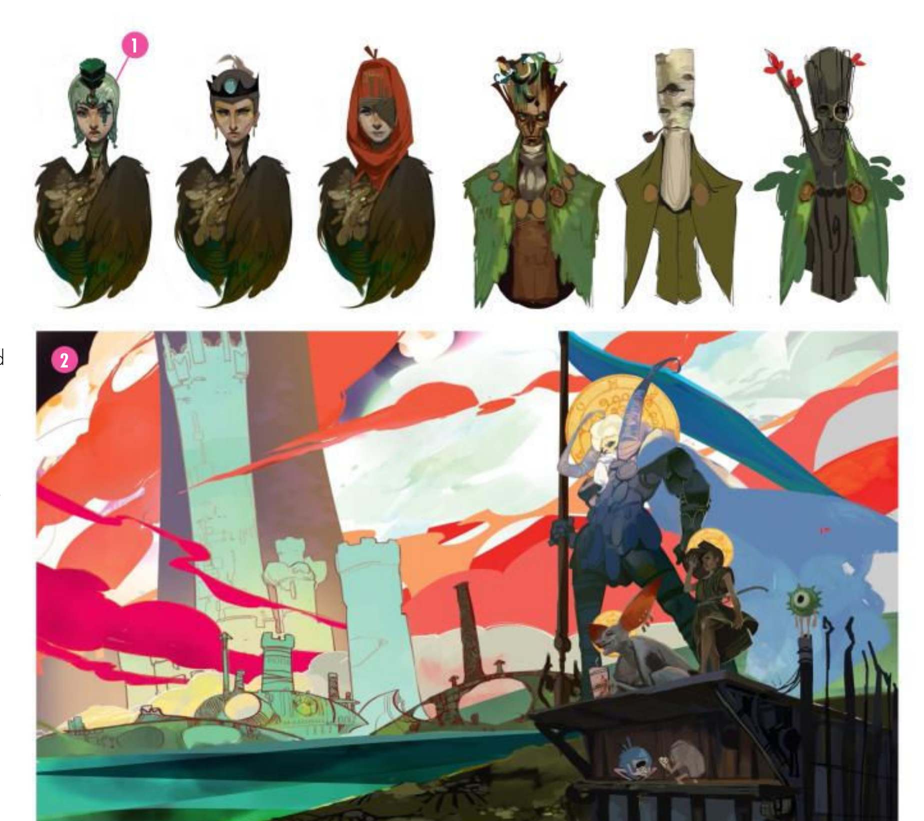
Since scoring players are temporarily banished, leaving the numbers uneven, the mechanics of the Rites reinforce the central theme of characters being highly dependent on one ▶

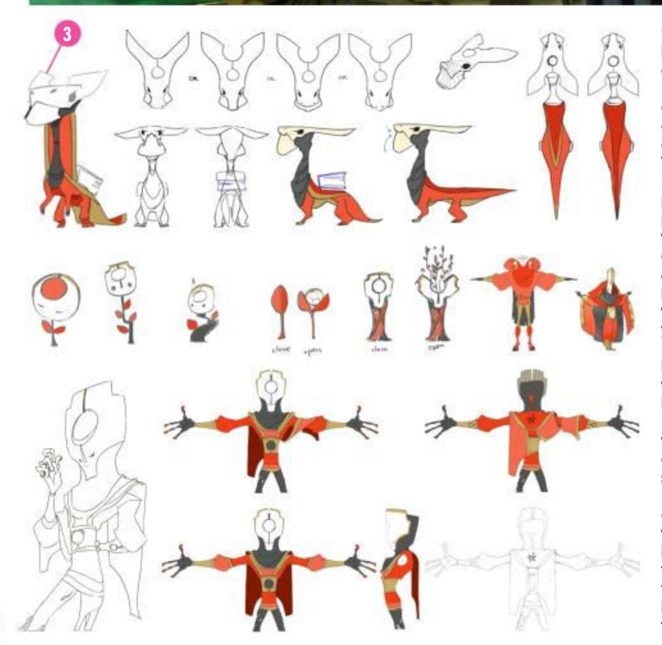
another to succeed. But Kasavin was also keen that the most important matches evoke a specific kind of feeling, one he'd been chasing from the very early stages of development. "It was this idea of a band of characters who at certain stages may have to say goodbye to some of their friends," he says. "But I mean that in like a literal goodbye, not a 'my friend is dead' goodbye." The latter, he admits, is much more common in contemporary games and films; part of the reason he wanted to offer an alternative. "That bittersweetness of saying farewell to a friend who may have gone on to something better but you're not going to see them around anymore day to day – that was something we were really interested to see if we could capture in a game."

And so the concept of the Liberation Rites was born. Matches come in cycles, and at the end of each one you must face off against another triumvirate, the winner getting to send one of their party back to the Commonwealth, the world from which these exiles were first banished. In most cases, your relationship with your rivals will be adversarial, but on occasion you may even be tempted to deliberately lose the game so that a respected opponent can make it back. Or you might simply prefer to selfishly keep a beloved teammate with you, for either their competitive strengths or their companionship.

It was the chance to craft that kind of dilemma that drove Kasavin's personal enthusiasm for *Pyre*, and it's clear he's been delighted by the player response. "Games are a very powerful medium for empathy, because you can inhabit a certain situation and through a combination of narrative and mechanics really experience what it might feel like to be in that situation," he says, citing Lucas Pope's dystopian immigration thriller *Papers, Please* as a particularly potent example. "Who would have thought a game about being a passport agent would be so incredibly engrossing and deeply empathetic? The next time you go through customs, you don't ever experience it in quite the same way."

In a sense, *Pyre* is a different expression of a similar idea: in forcing us to make these choices, the game invites us to consider the cruelty of the systems imposing the rules. It's designed, Kasavin says, as an antidote to the must-win mentality of most games. "In so many situations, we're trained to succeed at all costs without regard for how, as long as we achieve the result. I just thought from ▶





Supergiant designed *Pyre*'s races before it had a bead on specific characters, including the winged Harps and treelike Saps. (1) Art director Jen Zee supplied these early concepts, which informed the designs of Pamitha, Tamitha, Volfred and Manley, while the imposing Demon Jodariel was partly inspired by this mood painting (2). The doglike Curs (3) were conceived as more comedic characters, while the Saps were among the last archetypes to be modelled. Crafting a world that was attractive enough to compel you to visit all of its Celestial Landmarks (4) while making it believable that its characters would want to leave was a tricky balance to strike, Kasavin admits. "It's beautiful, but it's also a place where the forces of nature can overcome someone pretty easily, so it's a hard place to live." Darren Korb's soundtrack, later released on vinyl (5), also helped enrich a world you explore in your group's blackwagon (6), which contains the Book of Rites (7), a manual the player character, as part of the human Nomad race (8), translates for the rest of the Nightwings team











7

a story standpoint, it would be more interesting to have a situation where you at least stopped to consider the repercussions of your actions – and not in a judgmental way, but in a thoughtful way."

To make the choice feel more honest, and to ensure the game would respect the player's choices, Supergiant determined that there would be no game-over state. Win or lose, your journey will continue regardless – even if you fail every Liberation Rite. Though *Pyre* gently discourages players from doing so, Kasavin acknowledges that players conditioned to win will likely reload after a defeat. "I see players who – not necessarily boastfully – are like, 'Yeah, I got through the whole game without losing once', and part of me is a little bit sad whenever I read that because they missed out on what I think is a really interesting and unique part of *Pyre*," he says. "But it's also a very valid way to play, and I'm glad the game supports so many different player experiences." This must, we suggest, have been one of the biggest challenges during development. "Yeah," he says, breaking into laughter. "That's the shortest answer of this whole conversation. It was a lot of additional work."

Pyre's tale does end eventually, of course, and there's a lovely, surprising payoff when it comes. As a ballad plays over the credits – a grace note to round off composer Darren Korb's fittingly eclectic score – the lyrics adapt to the choices you've made, naming your allies and whether they stayed in the Downside or made it back to the Commonwealth. "That was a really early idea in the project, actually," Kasavin grins. "We prototyped it early on, but we didn't get back to it until relatively late in development." Some ideas fizzle out, or evolve into new ones, he says, but this one was too exciting to leave behind. "I always love when an early idea has enough potency among us on the team to actually take root like that, and for us to eventually realise it. I'm really glad it happened."

It's an optimistic conclusion to a story that begins at its darkest point, and steadily grows more hopeful as it goes on – a reflection of Kasavin's desire to leave "a lasting and positive impression" on players, an approach he says is shared by his colleagues. Indeed, as he touches upon the tribulations of the game's creation, we wonder if there's an autobiographical element to *Pyre*'s story, the camaraderie of the central group in difficult circumstances perhaps reflecting the developer's own. "Well, all of our games are inspired by personal experience to varying degrees, despite the fantastical nature of their settings," he says. "I want to write things that mean something to me, that feel true-to-life to me. We've been working close to nine years together at Supergiant, and gone through many different times over the years. And thankfully *Pyre* has once again put us in a position to stick together as a team and make something new." That the creative fires are still burning at this most versatile of indies is the happy ending such thoughtful teamwork has undoubtedly earned. ■



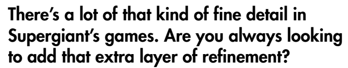
Q&A

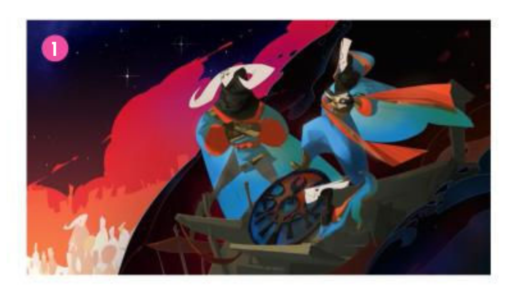
Greg Kasavin
Writer-designer, Supergiant Games

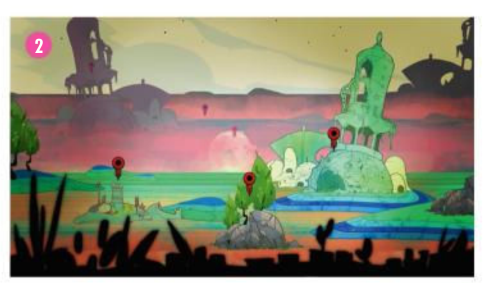
Having no game-over state is quite unusual…
Yeah. One of the old, old games that was an inspiration for me in this regard is the original *Wing Commander*. That had a whole separate storyline – essentially a 'losing' campaign – if you failed your mission objectives but didn't actually die. It blew me away at the time; I was amazed that much effort went into it. And they never did it again with a *Wing Commander* game. I always had a sneaking suspicion as to why, and having now gone through a similar experience, I understand more viscerally. (laughs) It's not something that most players will see, but for the ones that do, it results in a more memorable and impactful experience. We try to load our games with as many little details off to the side as we can, so the experience feels personal for everyone who plays.

There's a lot of that kind of fine detail in Supergiant's games. Are you always looking to add that extra layer of refinement?
For sure, we care about the craft of our work a lot. And since we make games that heavily rely on a narrative experience and a sense of atmosphere, I think that sort of attention to detail is justified.

What's next for Supergiant?
We're in the midst of figuring out what the next project is going to be while continuing to support *Pyre*. We're very grateful that people were willing to take a leap of faith on it, and we always love hearing what everybody thinks and the decisions they made along the way. It feels good to get it out there and survive the process and be able to keep going in [adopts dramatic voice] the cruel, high-stakes world of indie videogame development. There are so many great games out there that it's hard to put something out that can get any attention. We never take it for granted – we're always grateful to be able to stick around for another round.

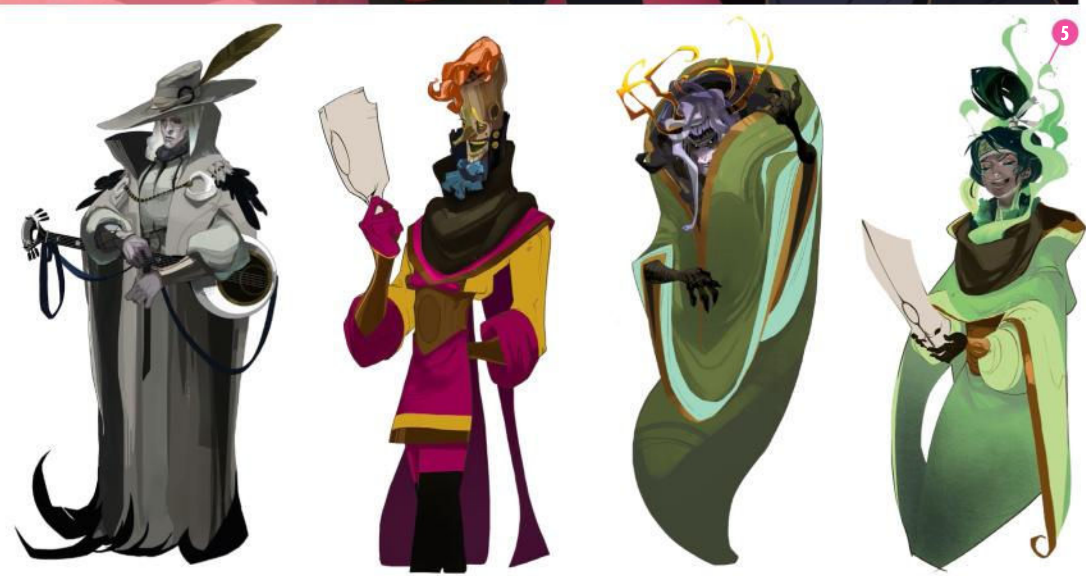








Jen Zee's striking reveal artwork 1 shows the Nightwings in their Rites uniforms, though during pre-production, Supergiant was considering filling its world, whose tonal differences were explored by Zee in another early test 2, with generated characters from the various races. "We ended up going with a more specific story and cast of characters for a variety of reasons that I think definitely worked out for the best," Kasavin says. Once character designs and styles 3 had been established for the archetypes, Kasavin and Zee closely collaborated on specific characterisations for the members of the Nightwings' squad 4 as well as the rival teams and supporting cast 5. Lone Minstrel Tariq (near right) was voiced by Korb, while Sandra the Unseeing (far right) quickly became a fan favourite





STUDIO PROFILE

BULKHEAD INTERACTIVE

How a studio of FPS fans went back to basics for its biggest hit to date

By Chris Schilling



Founded 2013
Employees 20
Key staff Joe Brammer (producer/studio lead), David Jones (lead designer), Kevin Chandler (lead programmer), Howard Philpott (creative lead)
URL www.bulkheadinteractive.com
Selected softography *Pneuma: Breath Of Life, The Turing Test, Battalion 1944 (Early Access)*
Current projects *Battalion 1944*

Unusually, it's quiet inside Bulkhead Interactive's spacious Derby offices. Then again, this might not be the ideal time for a visit. After two years in development, the studio's third game, multiplayer WWII shooter *Battalion 1944*, has endured a rough start, with servers struggling to cope with overwhelming launch-day demand. Producer **Joe Brammer** and his colleagues spent the subsequent weekend in the office rectifying the problem, and their efforts seem to have paid off. Everything seems to be in working order as we watch numbers updating in realtime, the morning figures dipping after a Sunday peak showing upwards of 8,000 concurrent players. Perhaps this isn't such a bad time after all, then. Certainly, Brammer seems relaxed, idly swinging a stick grenade – a replica, we're assured – as he reflects on the launch. But then this young studio lead is already well accustomed to stressful situations.

Bulkhead now has 20 staff, and is planning to recruit more off the back of *Battalion*'s promising early sales. In the beginning, Brammer says, it was just four people, building existential puzzler *Pneuma: Breath Of Life* in a tiny office – smaller than his own is now – with a window they couldn't open more than an inch during a particularly sticky summer, and almost no money to sustain them. Brammer reckoned they had about eight months to make a game, and after abandoning one unpromising idea within three weeks ("We were basically making *Rocket League*," he laughs) the group settled upon something very different. With no animators, no character artists – and no money – the studio opted to make a game which didn't have any characters. "We only had environment artists and two programmers. So we made a firstperson puzzler with just a narrator – a bit *Stanley Parable* meets *Portal*," Brammer says.

Robustly constructed, if a little slight, *Pneuma* sold well enough to fund the development of a second game with a bigger team. That follow-up was *The Turing Test* – a similarly thoughtful, narrative-led firstperson puzzler, more ambitious in scope and scale, conceived while *Pneuma* was still in production. During those late stages of development, Brammer, then just 22, decided to take his pitch to Square Enix Europe. The meeting, suffice it to say, didn't go well. "About halfway through I realised [the CEO] was bored. And when you don't make any money and you have to pay £90 to go from Derby to London on the train, and that's before you've got to go across town…" Brammer's pitch wasn't turned down on the day, but he knew the game was up when he heard the dreaded words: "We'll think about it". He did, however, receive an enthusiastic recommendation for a nearby café that made good bacon sandwiches – not quite the deal he was after.




Joe Brammer (left) co-founded Deco Digital, while David Jones headed up Bevel Studios. The two companies worked together on *Pneuma: Breath Of Life*, before merging in 2015

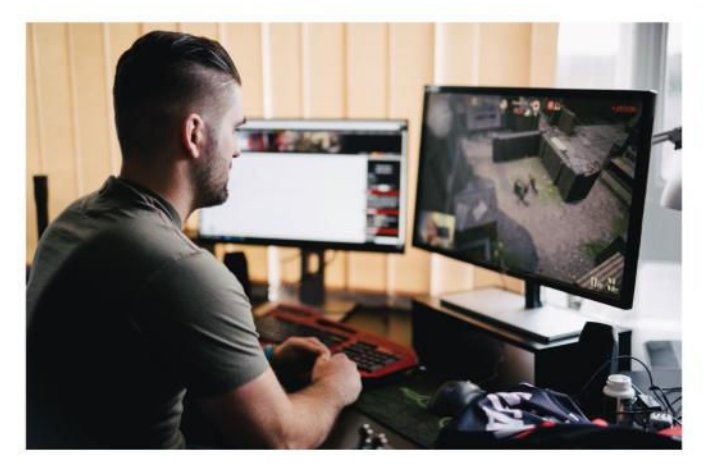
After a pitch to Microsoft proved equally fruitless, Brammer made a chance approach to a venture capitalist, arranging an interview on the same day as a meeting with Sony, to which he was accompanied by lead programmer Kevin Chandler and designer David Jones. When Chandler was forced to answer the call of nature between meetings, he returned to find Brammer and Jones being grilled by the irate investor. "He was absolutely furious, yelling at us, 'Why are you late? Where have you been?'" Brammer recalls. "I said to him, 'Maybe you should just play the game,' and he said, 'I don't fucking like being told what to do.'" The three walked out, and by the time they sat down with Phil Elliott from Square Enix Collective, the publisher's indie support arm, Brammer was in a foul mood: "I just said, 'Right, hi, I'm Joe. We're not doing a Kickstarter, so I don't really see how you can help us.'" The response from Elliott was equally brusque: "He said, 'Well, this will be the shortest meeting ever, won't it?'" But something evidently clicked: the Collective offered marketing support for *The Turing Test*, closing the circle on three months of pitching, and would team up with Bulkhead again for *Battalion 1944*.

"I SAID TO HIM, 'MAYBE YOU SHOULD JUST PLAY THE GAME,' AND HE SAID, 'I DON'T LIKE BEING TOLD WHAT TO DO'"

Theirs has clearly been a positive relationship so far; Brammer can't speak highly enough of the Collective's efforts, calling it "the most underrated indie publisher out there". Indeed, it's Elliott to whom we owe thanks for our host's bright demeanour. "I had a massive go at Phil over the weekend," he begins. "It was about 3am and I asked about sales figures." Tired and anxious, he hadn't quite made his message plain; Elliott said that he should be focused first and foremost on fixing bugs. Brammer erupted. "I said, 'You should be giving us the numbers, we want to know where our investment's gone,'" he says. Elliott calmly told him to relax; he had nothing to worry about on that front.

Brammer's concern about cold, hard numbers is understandable given that he had initially convinced his young friends to work for free; during the studio's early days, they survived on a relative pittance. Though *The Turing Test* turned a profit, a good portion of that money was invested in the creation of *Battalion 1944*. And even given his senior position at Bulkhead, Brammer says his monthly wage has "never been more than £856", the precise figure he quotes as evidence of a man accustomed to working to a stringent budget.

The shift from firstperson puzzler to shooter was partly a pragmatic decision, then. But it also aligned with the studio's sensibilities. When Brammer alludes to there being "a gap in the market" for a multiplayer WWII FPS at the time, he's not simply talking about the earning potential of the idea; rather, this was exactly the kind of game for which he'd been looking as a fan of the genre. "I've always played FPS games, and there was nothing [new] I wanted ▶





Brammer has taken to streaming *Battalion 1944* after work hours, though he admits he's been warned about his language once or twice. Still, such youthful exuberance is to be expected – almost everyone on the team is in their early to mid-twenties

to play," he says. Others at the studio felt the same; during lunch breaks and after hours during *The Turing Test*'s development, multiplayer sessions always defaulted to the evergreen *Counter-Strike*. One day, Brammer suggested a change to the rota, corralling a group of eight to play four-on-four Capture The Flag on *Call Of Duty 2*. This soon became the norm, and lunch was regularly extended. "It got more and more intense, and when you're your own boss you're like, 'Oh, go on, five minutes more'," he smiles. "Eventually people were getting so stressed after lunch that they needed time to calm down."

The seed had been planted, and the directors met to discuss the possibility of making an old-school WWII shooter, earmarking £20,000 to build a prototype. "We knew that was what we really wanted to work on. We knew there was nothing out there. I *knew* shooter fans wanted this. So we just thought: 'Fuck it. We'll do *The Turing Test* in the day and we'll do this in the evening.' And then we set up a Kickstarter, which we're pretty good at." His confidence was not misplaced: the campaign met its £100,000 goal within three days, ultimately raising more than three times as much.

There was surprise in some quarters that the target had been surpassed so quickly, but that only reflected the wider appetite for a historical FPS. While DICE's new *Battlefield* was heavily rumoured to be WWI-themed, it hadn't yet been announced; *COD*'s anticipated return to Allies versus Axis was further still from being confirmed – though Brammer says he was aware of its existence before work even started on the *Battalion* prototype. "Oh yeah," he nods. "We put all the spies out. But everyone knew they'd do it. And ours wasn't going to be the same game." Despite what Brammer modestly calls "the clunkiest prototype ever", *Battalion* was suddenly big news – though, he says, it could have been even bigger: "If we'd released the game back then, it would be massive. A WWII shooter when we announced it? I mean, that was when we wanted to release it. But considering *Call Of Duty* starts with an existing game, and they get another three years on top of that?" He points his thumb towards his chest and nods proudly. "Two years from fucking scratch. And we got some bugs on day one? Hallelujah!"

He's not brushing aside those initial troubles, however; indeed, he was willing to address them directly in a video diary, during which he accepted full blame. "I doubted us a bit too much, I guess," he nods. "We could see the game was really popular – loads of people wanted beta keys – but I believed we were in this echo chamber of everyone saying we were amazing." His prediction significantly lowballed the player count: in the end, the tally was four times higher than his best guess. He may not have been the only one at Bulkhead to do so, "but that was my job, and I let everyone down: our players, our fans, and my team," he adds. "I'm 25 and a studio lead. I'm gonna fuck up. But the most important thing was that, whatever bugs we had on day one, we had to fix them as fast as possible. We did exactly that."

At once bullish about his team's FPS expertise and refreshingly upfront about mistakes, Brammer is an engaging interviewee, though such openness has led to a few personal attacks online. Some find him abrasive, he says – though PR flacks would undoubtedly prefer 'passionate'. "But it's *real*," he says. "I really do like FPS games, and I really do think some people are talking absolute shit about my game. But I just love that there's a debate going on. I want to have someone say, 'Oh, I think this weapon's unbalanced,' and me not having to say, 'Thanks, we'll look into it', and instead saying, 'I totally disagree with you and think you're wrong, but I respect your opinion'. I mean, we're developers *and* players. 2018 is the year that those boundaries need to be broken down."

In the meantime, Bulkhead Interactive is breaking boundaries of its own. Having promised his team a new pool table should *Battalion 1944* shift 30,000 units on day one, Brammer is now working out where in the team's roomy, open-plan office it should go. Those colleagues whom he managed to convince to work for free during those early days are finally seeing their efforts properly rewarded. And, perhaps most importantly, this youthful developer is already opening up some of its spare office space for the next generation, lending the city's students a room in which they can make their own indie game. "If their game succeeds, great – we've now got another game in Derby that isn't *Yooka-Laylee* or *Battalion*," Brammer says. "Either that, or they're looking for a job and we're here, and we already have an idea of who's good and who's not. So it works for everyone, really." ■

"I REALLY DO LIKE FPS GAMES, AND I DO THINK SOME PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABSOLUTE SHIT ABOUT MY GAME"



1 *Battalion 1944* will be in Early Access for a year, with four major updates planned. The studio has turned down six-figure offers for esports tournaments. "That's not how it works," Brammer says.
2 Like Bulkhead's other games, *Pneuma: Breath Of Life* was built in Unreal Engine 4.
3 Firstperson puzzler *The Turing Test* cost a relatively modest £200,000 to make



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Super Mario 3D World Wii U
Heavens above, the GamePad feels even worse in the hands after nearly a year in Switch's company. Still, Mario's sole 3D outing for the console has aged wonderfully, and after *Odyssey*'s free-wheeling scope, a return to tightly condensed level design, in which nary a square foot is wasted, feels better than ever. This time, we promise, we're clearing Champion's Road.

Puzzle & Dragons iOS
With the sun setting on the European server due to low user figures, thank heavens for that Japanese alt we set up a while back. The timely return of the *Monster Hunter* collaboration sparks a wonderful synergy between our console and mobile gaming; we hunt down Nergigante on the big screen, then use his PAD incarnation to stomp through some of the hardest content in the game. A dying obsession, despite the language barrier, is duly rekindled.

Celeste Switch
We're used to 'masocore' platformers taking a perverse delight in robbing us of victory at a level's end. But *Celeste*'s introspective mountain-climbing conceit reframes things: a wall falling away at the last second is nature's twist of fate, our panicked clearance a triumph in a battle against ourselves rather than the developer. Yes, we have seen the B-sides – and the truly evil C-sides – but we're choosing to keep our fond image of Matt Thorson and team's genial little game intact, thanks.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

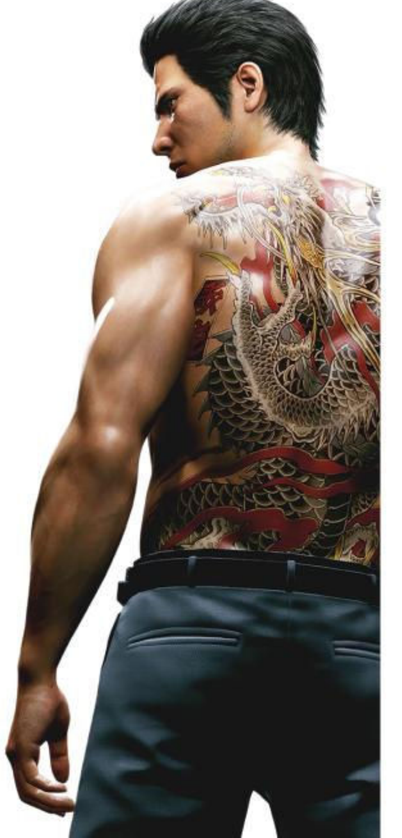


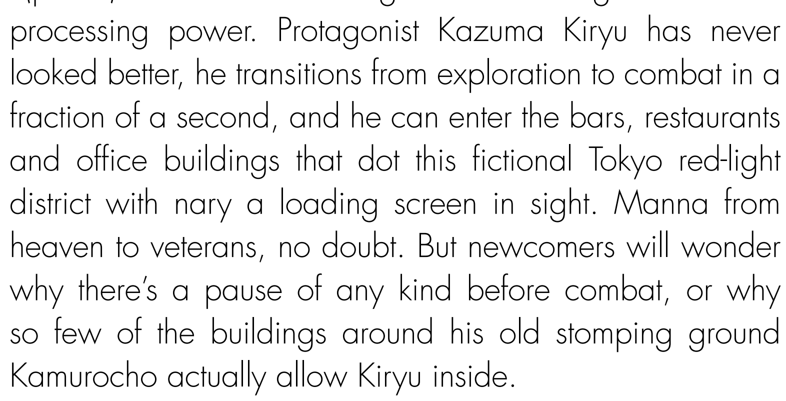
Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

A sip of water in the desert

They say familiarity breeds contempt, but in videogames, it often yields sympathy. To love a series of games is to look past its little flaws; over time, such quirks become part of the charm of one of your favourite games. And when, eventually, a kink is smoothed out, it feels like a giant leap forward.

But only in its own context. *Monster Hunter: World* (p104) arrives in, series die-hards will tell you, its most accessible form to date. That's meant as a compliment, though beginners may see it differently. Yes, this most languid, grindy and impenetrable of action RPGs has never been less languid, grindy or impenetrable. Yet it is still all those things to an extent, and without the context of previous games, newcomers will still have to put in the work to get their heads around a deeply idiosyncratic game that can still baffle the novice.





Similarly, *Yakuza 6* (p108) is built on a new engine custom-designed for PS4's processing power. Protagonist Kazuma Kiryu has never looked better, he transitions from exploration to combat in a fraction of a second, and he can enter the bars, restaurants and office buildings that dot this fictional Tokyo red-light district with nary a loading screen in sight. Manna from heaven to veterans, no doubt. But newcomers will wonder why there's a pause of any kind before combat, or why so few of the buildings around his old stomping ground Kamurocho actually allow Kiryu inside.

These are common problems for all established series, and it's far easier to innovate on your game's own terms than it is to raise the bar for the industry at large. Still, sometimes it's possible to do both. We know of developers across the globe who are studying *Monster Hunter: World* with a close eye, for instance – and judging by the state of our friends lists, so are the players.

Monster Hunter: World

Okay, the Scoutflies can stay. Tracking a beast in *Monster Hunter* used to mean scouring a cluster of small, self-contained zones, linked together via narrow paths – and brief loads – before stumbling across your target and immediately tagging it with a paintball, lest it disappear from view. The paint, as seasoned hunters will attest, would naturally wear off over time, forcing you to apply a fresh coat during longer fights. Now, instead, we have a cloud of luminous insects that flits between objects of interest, not so much drawing your attention as insisting on it. Eventually, they'll hover near a glob of mucus, a set of footprints, a wall scarred by claws; tap a button to investigate and they'll form a glowing breadcrumb trail, steadily leading you, clue by clue, towards your monstrous quarry. To veterans, this might sound like sacrilege; early on, it may even feel like it too. In practice, not only do you feel much more like a hunter, steadily picking up environmental clues as you get closer to your prize, but your first encounter with a new creature begins not with an awkward bit of busywork, but with the unsheathing of your weapon.

It's emblematic of a game that not only gets to the good stuff quicker, but also keeps you in the fight for longer. As before, you might have to climb a tendril, leap off a cliff, dive underwater or inch through a crawlspace to reach a new area, but there are no immersion-breaking pauses, no visual seams between them. That means when a wounded monster stumbles away, panting and tripping, it's a much more thrilling pursuit. You may even catch up before it manages a restorative meal or doze, while in the case of the flying Wyverns, you can use your insectoid assistants to pick up the trail – or, indeed, refer to the mini-map, which highlights any beasts you've encountered.

But more importantly than all that, the Scoutflies have also allowed Capcom to build environments more dense, intricate and detailed than ever before, without worrying about players getting lost and wasting too much time searching for their target. Even after dozens of visits, there are parts of the Ancient Forest you may not have visited, from its waterlogged caves to its knots of trees spiralling upward towards canopies and monster nests, with vines to climb and swing from. The arid, unforgiving Wildspire Waste proves rather easier to navigate, but then you'll need your phosphorescent guides once more to negotiate the gorgeous Coral Highlands, an underwater paradise that happens to be overground. Then follows a descent into the putrid wasteland of Rotten Vale, where the air is so thick with death and decay that it steadily saps your health.

Still, if this monster graveyard is as grim and grisly as *Monster Hunter* has ever been, it's also host to three of the game's best newcomers. Part cobra, part lizard, the Great Girros is a handsome, venomous pest of an opponent, capable of paralysing you with its oversized fangs, and feeding on carrion when it's losing the fight. The aggressive Odogaron moves at terrifying speed as it inflicts deep wounds with vicious swipes of its keen claws. Perhaps the pick of the bunch is the Radobaan, which, armoured with a shell of jutting bones, looks like a tar Katamari rolled through a wendigo nest; fittingly, one of its most effective attacks is to curl up into a ball and roll directly towards you. Carve up this trio and you'll end up with an armour set that makes you look like a member of the Norse black-metal band you thought only existed in your nightmares.

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now (PS4, Xbox One), Autumn (PC)

Its technical virtuosity comes secondary to the inventive brilliance of its creature designs



This preposterous-looking kit is a reminder that while *World* may be a calculated play for a western audience, *Monster Hunter* isn't about to lose its sense of identity. Yes, the strongman pose after you quaff a health or stamina potion is gone, but it's hardly missed. Your feline assistants, the adorable Palicoes, are back, still keeping monsters occupied, or giving you a gentle whack when you're stunned to knock some sense back into you. And if it's not quite as exaggeratedly silly as before, there's still a sense of comic desperation to your hunter's mid-fight running animation; similarly, holding the right trigger to scamper up a wall of ivy prompts an accelerated climb that looks wonderfully daft.

If these moments are entirely in service to fun rather than physicality, there are few games that quite sell the impact of their combat as well as this. Monsters may not react to every single blow you land, but over time their hides will be scarred, their armour stripped away, their unique abilities neutered – watch out for the tragicomic moment where a wounded Tzitzi-Ya-Ku tries to dazzle you, only to realise its frills no longer work. And the most precise or forceful attacks produce a tangible response: there are few things more satisfying than swinging your hammer with perfect timing to connect with the jaw of a charging beast, sending it sprawling to the ground so you can whale away as it bucks and writhes, desperately struggling to get back up.

It almost goes without saying that this is comfortably the best-looking *Monster Hunter* to date – moving from 3DS to home console, it really should be – but its technical virtuosity comes secondary to the inventive brilliance of its creature designs. The Paolumu is a clear favourite, a bat-like creature that inflates a collar around its neck to literally balloon in size, while the sleek-winged Legiana, the apex predator of the Coral Highlands, has a striking elegance – at least when not launching volleys of stamina-draining ice crystals at you.

The spectacle is heightened by the greater frequency of monster-on-monster action, giving the sense of a functioning ecosystem at which previous games only tentatively hinted. Venture into Wildspire Waste, for example, and you may well see the slimy, mud-dwelling ▶

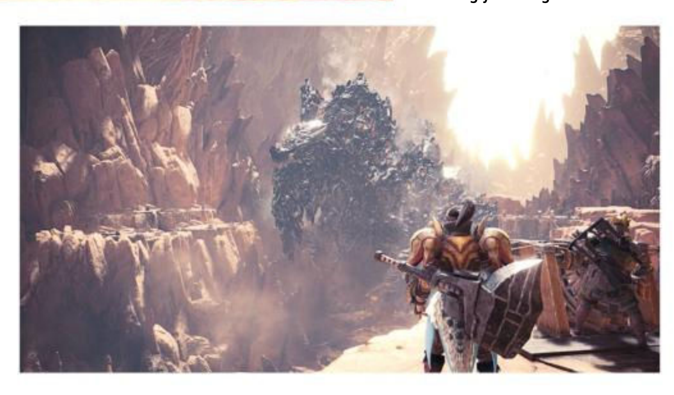
ABOVE Your first encounter with the comical Kulu-Ya-Ku is an early opportunity to use your hunter's Slinger: a stone, one of a variety of ammo types, can dislodge the boulder it clutches to protect itself. LEFT The health and stamina boosts from a pre-hunt meal can make all the difference. During longer quests, you're able to fill your belly at any unlocked campsites, though the benefits won't be as significant



BELOW A climactic fight against the Zorah Magdaros is stodgy and not a whole lot of fun. Then you realise you're still quite a way from the end, with many unique beasts awaiting you in High Rank



ABOVE The Tzitzi-Ya-Ku often becomes an unwitting assistant, as it wanders into the fray, flashes its frills to leave the bigger beasts dazed and trots off



Jyuratodus wrap itself around the heavily-armoured Barroth (the latter, once recovered, will retaliate with a powerful headbutt). Such face-offs aren't wholly organic: if the two meet again, the encounter will likely play out similarly, but their predictable behaviour can be factored into your battle tactics, as you deliberately bait one toward another before retreating to a safe place to watch them knock spots off each other and subsequently make your job all the simpler. Assuming, that is, you don't attract the attention of both rivals at once.

And if you do, you've got more ways to fight back. With higher ground in just about every area, it's easier to mount enemies than before – and if a leaping attack lands, you might end up pummelling away at a monster's tail or face, rather than simply playing bucking bronco on its back. With the addition of a cape, you can catch drafts of air, or glide off tall platforms toward your foe. Steep inclines, meanwhile, turn sprints into downhill slides, letting you launch into a jump and another potential rodeo opportunity. The hammer's spinning aerial convinced us to switch from our favoured Insect Glaive – though the latter almost tempted us back with its wonderfully impossible mid-air dash, letting you course-correct a misjudged vault.

There are more ways to get out of trouble, too. Capcom has gone as far as to let you eat or drink on the move – with the caveat that interrupting the animation by breaking into a sprint or being struck means forgoing its benefits. You don't have to retreat quite so far to sharpen your weapon, with a ghillie cape that camouflages you from view in areas with plenty of brush or objects to hide behind. Then again, monsters have a nasty habit of clipping through scenery, while the camera is a persistent pain. Long-time hunters will



HAPPY HUNTING GROUND

Capcom makes it clear it would prefer you to play in a group from the start, inviting you to search for or create an online session as soon as you've selected your save file. There are plenty of parameters to narrow your search, whether you'd rather play any assignment quest alongside a team of beginners, or tackle a specific monster with more experienced hunters. You can join or invite friends elsewhere, but Astera's Gathering Hub is the place to be: up to 16 players can hang out here, posting or accepting quests, responding to SOS flares, feeding up before heading out, and even engaging in impromptu arm-wrestling matches over a barrel. It all adds to the convivial atmosphere surrounding one of the friendliest multiplayer games around.

Your lodgings in Astera are modest at first, but as you progress you'll have the option to move to more lavish surroundings. Retiring to your quarters to listen to harp music is the perfect way to unwind after an intense hunt

know that careful movement of the camera is as important as careful manoeuvring around your prey, but with such large and fast-moving enemies it's not always possible – an unfortunate side-effect of *World*'s menagerie boasting some of the series' largest, quickest and deadliest monsters to date.

The most glaring problem, however, comes when trying to play the campaign cooperatively – a process which, unlike *World*'s environments, is anything but seamless. Capcom has, in its infinite wisdom, decreed that players can only join an assignment once everyone has seen its key cutscene, which means two friends at the same point in the story will have to enter the quest separately, with one quitting to join the other once the scene in question has played out. And with their bad lip-syncing and moments of inadvertent comedy – just wait for the "massive slag" scene – they really aren't good enough to justify such needless hoop-jumping.

In truth, there were always likely to be a few legacy holdbacks for a long-running series making its boldest stride forward in years. It isn't quite the dramatic leap some will suggest; *Monster Hunter* isn't vastly more accessible than it was before, but then the series was never quite as impenetrable as some made out. *World* simply smooths out a few of the bigger obstacles to new players, and makes the whole thing so spectacular that any lingering bumps can be tolerated, if not fully excused. In other words, it's still *Monster Hunter*. This latest – and surely greatest – entry simply makes it easier than ever before to understand why its fans fell in love with it in the first place. ■

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Post Script

The key changes that make World the most welcoming Monster Hunter to date

We're sure it's a happy accident. Idle awhile on *Monster Hunter: World*'s title screen and the music will likely remind you of another popular cooperative multiplayer-focused game. Evoking *Destiny* certainly isn't the worst idea, not least with Bungie's game currently leaving its players a little ill at ease. Some will have drifted to the likes of *PUBG* or *Fortnite*, but Capcom's game is another potential alternative – and it's precisely that kind of player that *World* is seeking to win over.

There are more obvious signs that this most Japan-centric of series has been taking notes from western games as it attempts to provide a friendlier welcome to rookie hunters. Its ill-judged opening, for example: a sub-*Uncharted* set-piece that makes out you're climbing a fiery mountain, before it's revealed that you're on the back of a colossal Elder Dragon known as Zorah Magdaros. It's a clunky thing, hardly representative of the rest of the game; likewise a later sequence in which you face off against the beast once more, this time ferrying ammo to cannons and ballistae which you must load and fire at the dragon to halt its progress.

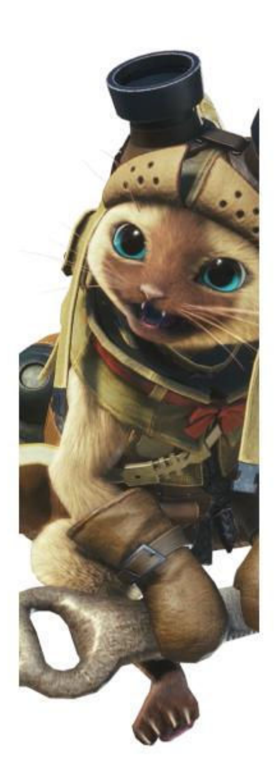
These are missteps, sure, but they're ones taken in the right direction. *World* tries hard to retune its more esoteric tendencies to appeal to a broader audience – and, judging by the early response, it seems to have largely succeeded. A subsequent tutorial is similarly laboured, but in walking players through the first main area, it at least gives newcomers a better idea of what to expect, while running veteran players through a couple of the bigger changes, including the Scoutflies. It ends with a bang, too, as you witness at close quarters a battle between two beasts: a useful reminder that running away when outmatched is not only an acceptable tactic, but also an eminently sensible one.

Since you're travelling as part of a group of ecologists tracking the movements of the Zorah Magdaros and charting this so-called New World, it's perhaps a little incongruous that your research tends to involve slaying anything you encounter rather than bringing back live specimens. Capture missions do come in time, but a later sequence that touches upon the way the death of a creature can itself help perpetuate life in a working ecosystem seems to have been designed mostly to make the player feel better about all the beasts they've slain and carved up into hats. Either way, by the time we reach *World*'s main hub, we've got a robust narrative setup with a tangible reason to both explore the land and remove any obstacles preventing the researchers from venturing further into it.

This framing has more important benefits elsewhere. Activities in the field reward you with Research Points that are, if anything, a more valuable currency than your assignment fees. Optional bounties invite you to investigate bonepiles, collect mushrooms and herbs, and mine ore, as well as killing or capturing monsters. Rather than separate foraging missions, these can be undertaken as part of a standard hunt or expedition.

There are missteps, sure, but they're ones taken in the right direction

Meanwhile, a barrage of text tutorials gives you extra detail on the various vendors and NPCs you should be interacting with before missions. It's a conventionally Japanese way of doing things, but while it gives you all the information you really need, it's debatable whether it properly attunes all players to the importance of the pre-hunt routine. Soon, though, you'll get into the habit: putting together a shopping list, checking your item pouch to make sure you're suitably equipped, crafting restoratives or traps if need be, buying provisions, eating a health and stamina-boosting meal, and finally accepting your assignment. Job done, you return, hand in your bounties, upgrade your kit, and repeat the process. In time, the ritual becomes second nature – in part because Astera doesn't feel merely like an extended lobby, but a location in its own right, a place in which you'll actively want to spend time.



As far as combat goes, *World* provides a much gentler on-ramp for beginners. A training area lets you test out the 14 different weapon types, while button prompts during a hunt let you know which moves you can pull off and when. It's not totally successful, since if you're focused on the action the text is in your peripheral vision, and in the middle of a combo, inputs may only flash up for a split-second. But it's enough to get through the first few quests, by which time you'll realise how much you're learning on the job.

There's still room for improvement. Any sought-after weapons or armour pieces can be added to a wishlist, which lets you know when you've got all the ingredients you need to make those Rathalos Vambraces you've had your eye on. It's a great idea, but while you'll know exactly where to get the monster parts you need, you won't know offhand where the other materials come from. That, almost inevitably, is found within a completely different screen. And it doesn't quite do enough to warn new players that damage scaling means it's unwise to play as a pair – after three failed attempts at taking down Anjanath as a duo, two of the **Edge** crew soloed it with little trouble.

To a point these are understandable stumbles – and besides, Capcom has already earned enough goodwill to overcome them with its schedule of free DLC and lack of microtransactions. For once, a loot-based game comes without any extra pressure on the player to pony up; if *World* shows *Monster Hunter* has learned a few tricks from its western contemporaries, this is one important lesson it can hopefully teach them in return. ■

Yakuza 6: The Song Of Life

They have a saying down in Okinawa, the sleepy southernmost prefecture of Japan where, back in *Yakuza 3*, Kazuma Kiryu ran an orphanage for a spell. 'Hara hachi bu' is an old Confucian teaching that roughly translates as 'eat until you're 80 per cent full'. Kiryu may not spend much time at Sunshine Orphanage in *Yakuza 6* – it quickly becomes apparent that he's needed elsewhere – but he certainly has need of that lesson on his latest, and final, journey.

The series' timeworn health system has finally been overhauled, with the culinary wares on offer at local businesses now filling our hero's stomach, as well as his health bar. Meals also give XP in multiple categories, to be spent on new moves, stat upgrades and performance buffs in *Yakuza 6*'s various minigames and distractions. XP, then, is the game's most valuable currency. Should Kiryu's belly be full, he'll still recover health, though at a far less generous rate than he did in previous games. Crucially, however, a full stomach means no more XP from food until you work off some calories.

There's your mechanical reason for watching your weight; handily, there's a narrative one too. Thanks to their habitually calorie-controlled diet, Okinawans have sub-average BMI scores, and a world-beating proportion of citizens over 100 years old. Kiryu isn't *that* old – neither the chides of "gramps" from street thugs, nor his frequent references to himself as a "washed-up old yakuza", ring entirely true – but he's certainly knocking on a bit. Early on, fresh out of a prison sentence imposed for his misadventures in *Yakuza 5*, he certainly seems to be feeling his age: he's unable to sprint for much more than 100 yards before stopping, bent double. A few upgrades later, he's back at his best, the only reminder of his advancing years being his wrinkles, the dark rings around his eyes, and the constant references to his age, the developers missing no opportunity to remind you this is Kazuma Kiryu's swan song.

Those unflattering features are powered by a new engine, meaning Kiryu's final game is the first to be built on technology designed for PS4. That it is hardly a technical showcase should be no surprise when put in the context of its series, but it's clearly a step up. Accessible buildings can now be entered without a loading pause. New fabric and skin shaders, combined with much improved lighting and animation systems, make a world we've come to know by heart, and the people that move within it, feel more alive than ever.

Unfortunately it comes at quite a cost. The first is a framerate that peaks at 30fps and, on the base-model PS4, frequently plummets below its lowly target. If that alone doesn't have those coming from the 60fps-enabled *Yakuza 0* or *Kiwami* pining for the good old days, then a world that has markedly less to do certainly will. The northern edge of the city, home in previous games to a bathing spa, the hotel district, a park full of homeless people and at one point an entire underground city, is blocked off for the whole game because of roadworks. Many distractions have been cut, too, and the new additions – a gym, a cam-girl minigame, a cat cafe with no actual cats that asks you to befriend strays with food bought from convenience stores, because this is *Yakuza*, remember – don't feel substantial enough to make up the shortfall.

Developer Yakuza Studio
Publisher Sega
Format PS4
Release April 17

Yakuza 6's narrative builds to one of the finest climaxes in the series – perhaps, in fact, the best of the lot



BABY BLUES
The story once again focuses on Hakura Sawamura, the orphan introduced in the first game in the series to whom Kiryu has become a father figure over the years. Having disappeared while Kiryu was in prison, he learns upon his release that she's been left comatose by a hit-and-run incident. Worse still, she now has a kid. That leaves Kiryu holding the baby while he tries to retrace her steps, the nadir of which is a nighttime trek through Onomichi hunting for formula milk, periodically using gesture controls to shush a crying infant. Thankfully, it's a one-off, and Kiryu soon makes new friends onto whom he can offload his new charge. That's the kind of parenting we can get on board with.

That's especially true in Onomichi, the Hiroshiman town where Kiryu spends far too much of the game. While bigger than it first appears, it's no Kamurocho in size, and certainly not in density. It's a rather naked attempt to push you into the town's principal distraction, a 100v100 RTS side-mode with street thugs for units that, while bonkers, is nowhere near as compelling as, say, *Yakuza 0*'s real-estate and cabaret management games. Ignore that, and Onomichi feels a lonely, empty place indeed.

Combat, too, has lost a little of its lustre. While ostensibly a more involved, more serious system, the loss of recent entries' multiple battle styles is keenly felt, despite a commendable attempt to combine elements of them all in one place. Enemies are quicker to put up their guard now, and thanks to the new engine, attack in greater numbers. As such it's rare that you'll complete a combo without being twonked in the back of the head by an enemy you couldn't even see. In that context, the new Extreme Heat mode – which sees Kiryu enter a Devil Trigger-style powered-up state for a spell – feels almost like an apology. During it, while you'll still take damage from enemy attacks, only the heaviest will stagger you.

If all that sounds disappointing, rest assured that, to series fans, absolutely none of it matters. While it takes the customary age to get into its stride, and one twist in particular isn't so much signposted as almost insultingly obvious, *Yakuza 6*'s narrative builds to one of the finest climaxes in the series – perhaps, in fact, the best of the lot. You might think the knowledge that this is Kiryu's last appearance would take the sting out of the story, but Yakuza Studio handles it with grace, letting the real question – that of just *how* final Kiryu's journey is – dangle until the very last. The stakes, as such, seem that much higher, every play to your emotions hitting you like a sucker punch to the gut.

When the dust settles, the series fan is given something that no previous *Yakuza* game, bound as it has been to an inevitable sequel, has ever offered: closure. The *Yakuza* series will continue but, with Kiryu out of the picture, it will never be quite the same. Our departing hero might be best off eating until he's 80 per cent full. But fans will gorge on *Yakuza 6*. When you don't know where your next meal is coming from, you won't want to leave even a crumb.

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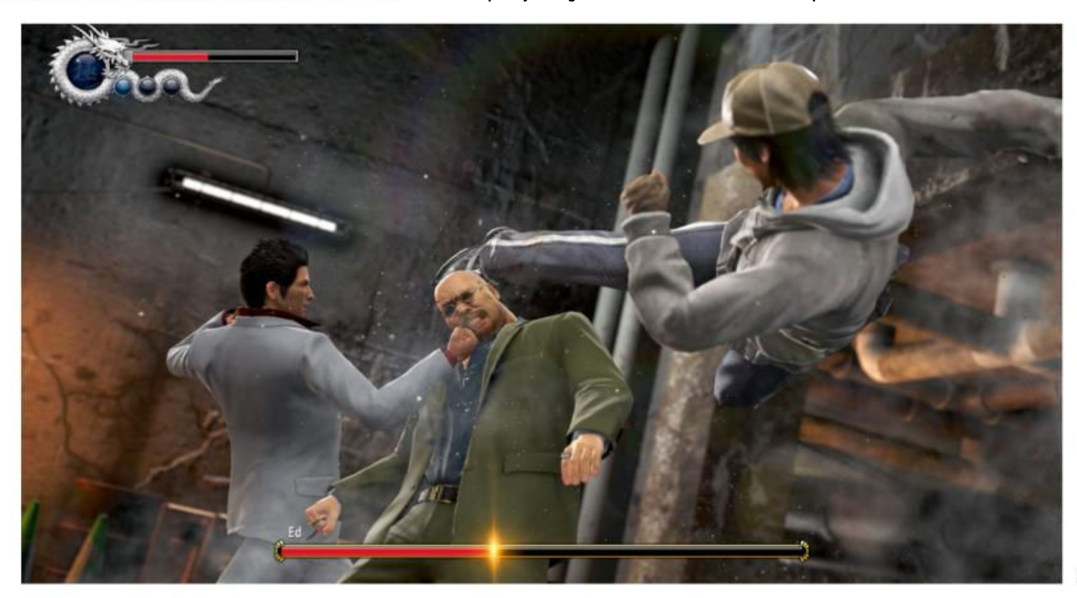






ABOVE Extreme Heat mode is the best way of focusing damage on a single target, and not just for the stagger protection. Pass a simple QTE, or mash a button quickly enough, and a boss' health bar will take quite the dent

MAIN While there's no HDR support (all PS4 Pro offers is a more stable framerate), the new lighting model does wonders for Kamurocho. ABOVE Beat Takeshi, perhaps best known on western shores for his role as blind samurai Zatoichi, cuts a restrained, faintly bored figure as Onomichi patriarch Hirose. RIGHT This is a callback to the team attacks in *Yakuza 4* – don't expect to see many of them this time out, since Kiryu works largely alone




Yakuza Studio's pride in its new engine is clear in the way Yakuza 6 sets a new series record for extreme Kiryu close-ups

Post Script

Bidding a fond farewell to one of gaming's great protagonists

We've written before in these pages of the importance of Kamurocho to the *Yakuza* games; of how much a fixed setting can lend to a long-running series in an era where so many open-world franchises put down new roots with each fresh instalment. But now, with Kazuma Kiryu gracing a *Yakuza* game's box art for the final time, it's time to give him his due. Kamurocho, loosely modelled on Tokyo's Kabukicho red-light district, may be Yakuza's beating heart. Kiryu, however, has always been its soul.

And heavens, he's been through it over the years, battered and broken, cast out and imprisoned, and double-crossed so many times it's a wonder he can still see straight. He's been a toy-car racer, a real-estate dealer, an orphanage manager; he's a batsman, a bowler, a phone-sex god and a legendary hostess-club flirt. *Yakuza*'s magic is in how it somehow manages to juxtapose the serious business of the high-stakes criminal underworld with the unseemly daftness of a Japanese red-light district. Across seven mainline games and the zombie spin-off *Dead Souls*, Kazuma Kiryu has beaten up bad guys, beaten sporting rivals, and beaten himself off. By seeing this mad world through his eyes for hundreds of hours across more than a decade, we have come to know him more deeply – sometimes a little *too* deeply, sure – than any videogame protagonist you can name.

Kiryu makes sense of Kamurocho, a place of absurd, dangerous contrast. Only rarely, when someone has foolishly put those he loves in danger, is he a willing participant in the violence; he doesn't want to hurt people, just to teach them a lesson, to have them see the error of their ways (many street thugs have, by his hand, promised to clean up their act). While he's thrown people off rooftops and plunged blades into countless bellies, the story insists he's never actually killed. He is at once distant from Kamurocho, the only pure heart to be found in a land of blood and sin, and entirely, inextricably part of it. When the story takes us away from Tokyo – to Osaka, Naha, or Onomichi – he grounds it all, the familiar face in a foreign land.

Needless to say, we will miss him, and credit to Yakuza Studio for handling his send-off with such grace. Even when *Yakuza 6* isn't specifically about Kiryu, it still is, in its way. Parenting is a recurring theme, the complex, tangled family lives of the mobsters with whom he butts heads mirroring his own relationship with Haruka – who, despite being watched over by Japan's biggest-ever badass, has nonetheless been kidnapped, left comatose and otherwise constantly imperilled because of her association with him. Kiryu's age, meanwhile, gives rise to a recurring subplot about technology's forward march, our wrinkled hero struggling to make sense of a world that is changing at pace in ways that often make little sense, be that a view-hungry YouTuber or a smartphone AI assistant that becomes too smart for its own good.

That's a theme that permeates the entire game, with Kiryu's ageing form resplendent in the new *Yakuza* engine, another odd contrast in a game and a world that are full of them. A new protagonist, Kazuga Ichiban, was announced last year, and could barely look more different to his predecessor; mad-haired and wild-eyed, his clothing is a Kiryu palette swap, white shirt under red suit. So far, he's only been confirmed to star in one game. The forthcoming *Yakuza Online*, in development for PC and mobile, will be free-to-play and supported by cosmetic microtransactions; we've walked the streets of the Tokyo red-light district in the dead of night hundreds of times, but that feels like a dangerous place indeed for this most honourable of series to be headed. Just as Kiryu spends his swan song struggling to adjust to modern technology, so must Sega – and the rest of us – come to terms with what *Yakuza* looks like when you take away its soul. ■

Dragon Ball FighterZ

We left our visit to Bandai Namco HQ for **E**313's *Dragon Ball FighterZ* story with one question. While Arc System Works appeared to have successfully delivered a game that would appeal to two very different groups – the genre-novice *DBZ* fan, and veteran fighting-game players – how did it intend to bridge the gap between the two, helping the former on the long, tough road to becoming the latter? The answer, sadly, is that it hasn't. *Dragon Ball FighterZ* is two games in one. It is two very good games, too. But it's hard not to see it as a missed opportunity, a game that seemed perfectly placed to solve its genre's biggest problem declining to even engage with it.

Dragon Ball FighterZ is either a game in which you merrily mash buttons and watch as a succession of bonkers-haired anime warriors duff each other up on a screen filled with fireworks, or one where you spend hours in training mode, experimenting endlessly with team combinations and combo optimisations. This is par for the course in fighting games, certainly. Yet it's especially disappointing given the massmarket pull of the Dragon Ball licence, and that *FighterZ*'s maker has a reputation as a fine teacher of fighting games.

Arc's tutorials are the stuff of legend, not just telling you how to do a move but why it's worth knowing, and when you should use it. Amazingly, almost all of that is gone. *FighterZ*'s tutorial imparts only the basics – fair enough, perhaps, given the way the game brings long, flashy combos within reach of a novice. But it is almost entirely bereft of context.

Take, for example, the Sparking Blast. Activated by pressing two shoulder buttons at the same time, it can be used defensively to push an opponent away from you across the screen. When used on the attack, it can extend combos, cancelling a move's animation and causing your foe to crumple to the floor. And it buffs your damage and health recovery, the strength of the effect scaling according to your number of surviving team members. It is an essential tool that is capable of turning a match in your favour, or putting one that's already going your way to bed. How does the tutorial explain this vital move? When attacking, apparently, it "temporarily powers up your character." On defence? "Turn the tables with a Sparking Blast!"

Those who buy the game because of their love of the source material won't care, admittedly. They certainly won't need it, since opponents in the Story mode are polite, submissive sorts, happy to be knocked around so long as you're having fun. Another novel system is the Ki Charge, which lets a character build up super meter for free by pressing two face buttons. You can be hit out of the lengthy animation, however, and if you try it online you're asking for trouble. In Story mode, though, you're left to it, the AI only too eager to give you the resources you need to fill the screen with a succession of beautiful cinematic super moves. We get most of the way through the first of Story mode's three arcs before an opponent blocks one of our attacks, and by no means does that signal the start of a trend.

Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Developer Arc System Works
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The AI transforms from button-shy novice to psychic wizard in the blink of an eye



HOME BUTTON
While the auto-combo system is a tremendous help for the lesser-skilled player, advanced sorts won't need them at all; indeed, they're frequently thoroughly suboptimal. The real beating heart of the game, whatever your skill level, is the Super Dash, activated with a press of the right trigger. A homing dash move with a degree of invincibility to projectiles, it brings mobility – a vital tool in team-based fighting games – within elegant reach of the masses, and ends with a hit that can be comboed out of. It's a rare example of an idea that's useful for players at either end of the skill spectrum – something of which *FighterZ* could have done with an awful lot more.

Story mode is for watching cutscenes and mindlessly pressing buttons, then. And that's fine, because *Dragon Ball FighterZ* rewards mindlessly pressing buttons with joyous, dizzying abandon. Mash out light attacks and you'll perform a basic combo, including an aerial component; do the same with mediums and the resulting string will end in a super move. Most characters can perform a fireball attack with a button press, which can be mashed for a rapid-fire volley. And most share a movelist, with simple, universal commands producing character-specific results, encouraging you to move around the cast without needing to spend too much time learning the intricacies of each one – essential in a story mode that throws new characters at you at a fair clip. There's a levelling system, with team members growing in strength and survivability the more you use them. But it's really not needed given the hands-off nature of the AI; you'll soon find yourself ignoring most of a chapter's map screen, taking the shortest route to the area boss, the gap between your level and your opponent growing but never really seeming to matter.

It's abysmal training for the *real* game, which you'll discover either in the upper difficulty tiers of Arcade mode, where the AI transforms from button-shy novice to psychic wizard in the blink of an eye, or when you head online. Suddenly *FighterZ* becomes a different game; one of magic, sure, and astonishing beauty, but it's one that a dozen-plus hours of the Story component has done absolutely nothing to prepare you for.

It's also one that's very hard to follow: graphical splendour can be a hindrance when you're trying to work out which direction you need to block in on a screen full of neon plasma and special effects. And the source material doesn't help either: when half the cast are variations on the same manga boy with a colourful mop of hair, it's hard to even tell which character's yours.

At launch, despite multiple beta tests, we encounter numerous network problems, the decision to clump players together in 64-player lobbies meaning it feels like a blessing to actually get into a match. That will doubtless settle down, both as Bandai Namco tweaks things behind the scenes and as hordes of casual players leave with tails between legs when a game whose Story mode made them feel like a god suddenly reminds them that they are in fact an ant. The result is a brilliant fighting game for newcomers, and a wonderful one for genre fans, that somehow still manages to feel like a disappointment for so comprehensively failing to bring its two demographics together. ■

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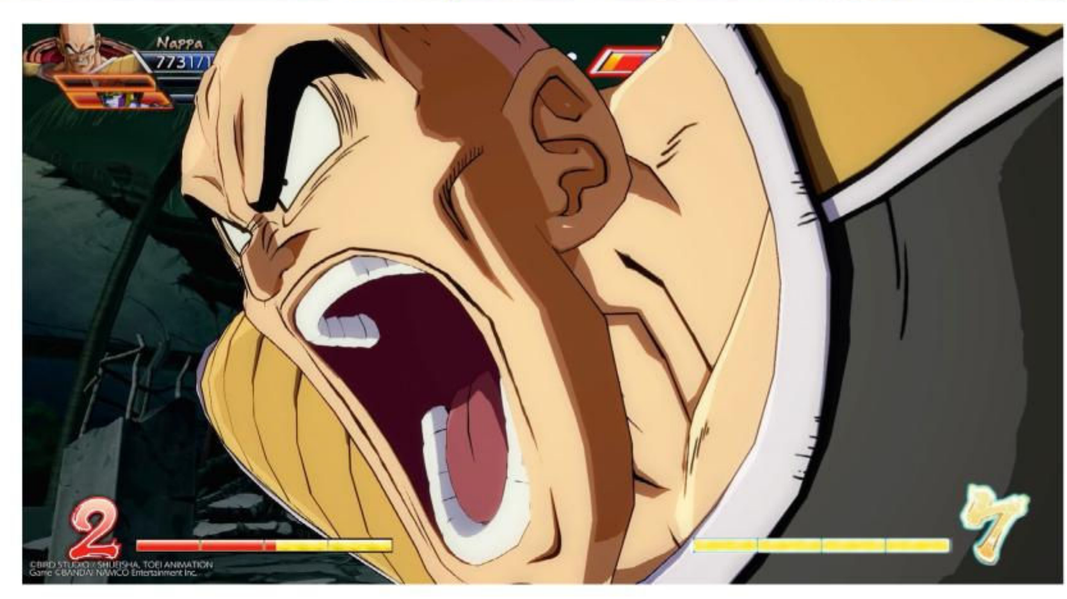




ABOVE Android 21 is the antagonist in Story mode, and builds power by turning enemies into candy and eating them. While designed by DBZ creator Akira Toriyama, she's an odd, excessively pendulous fit



TOP While super moves offer obvious visual rewards, you soon start to wonder whether you're using that seven-stock meter efficiently. The game has no interest in helping you, though. **MAIN** The medium-attack auto combo may offer a direct route to a super move, but not all characters have it easy. Some start up with a slow hop attack, for instance, leaving you open if it's blocked. **RIGHT** Nappa may not be troubling any tier lists, but he's at least a departure from all the boys with daft hair. He plants a Saibaman which attaches to opponents before blowing itself up



Fe

When *Fe*'s credits roll, learning that its game director was also its art director hardly comes as a surprise. That's not to suggest it lacks substance, but it's a game that relies on the goodwill it frequently banks with its looks to forgive some of its exasperating faults. And it really is beautiful: pulsing light juxtaposed with inky shadows in a delightfully angular, otherworldly forest setting that elicits wonder and trepidation. If there's a whiff of familiarity about the way it looks and feels, that's because it's been gazumped slightly by Ubisoft Reflections' *Ode*. That game's soft edges are absent here: this is a spikier game in every sense (and a prettier one, too) but both present reactive worlds that flourish through sound.

In *Fe*'s case, those sounds come from the throat of a scrawny, courageous little fox cub – from scratchy babbling noises to more tuneful howls. This is how he communicates with the other flora and fauna, from a stag upon whose back he can ride around, to fungi that illuminate darkened caves – at least until their glow fades and you're forced to issue an urgent vocal reminder. You'll get a response from most things, such that you'll often be tempted to break the occasional silence with a bark or two, if only to jolt the forest from its torpor.

All of this is sweet but inessential, though inevitably there are obstacles you'll need some help to pass. At which point you'll need to learn the lingo: animals naturally make different sounds, and you'll need to tune into their frequency to communicate with them. You'll begin a conversation of sorts, adjusting Fe's voice to the right pitch, eventually locating the right note that lets you know you speak their language. It's a smart use of the analogue triggers, as you try to find and hold the sweet spot for a few seconds and a wavering line steadies, permanently binding Fe and her new ally.

Their assistance rarely comes for free. To soar between nests on a bird's back, you'll need to first retrieve four eggs for a fretting mother; wormlike critters will only teach you the uncomfortably phlegmy sound needed to trigger trampoline-like blooms after you've escorted their offspring to safety. One playful flourish sees you engaged in a game of hide-and-seek with your own kind, scampering up trees to knock them off, as you both tumble happily to the ground. Other abilities are gained from scattered collectables fed into a giant tree at the heart of the forest, letting you climb, glide and, a little too belatedly, break into a run. At times, exploration has a rhythm that's almost reminiscent of *Breath Of The Wild* – only here you're climbing trees, rather than cliffs, from which to float down.

Threats come predominantly from an invading army of imposing bipeds. At first they resemble automata, but they soon seem more alien, as they suddenly drop to all fours and scuttle along, somewhere between a spider and Boston Dynamics' terrifying dogbots. Their mission, seemingly, is to get some peace and quiet – as such, parents may well empathise with the apparent villains of the piece – by capturing the forest's animals. This involves imprisoning them in spherical cells formed from a flimsy organic webbing; a foolproof masterplan were it not for the fact that a single seed, gathered from a nearby plant, is enough to break them free.

They'll use the same stuff to trap you if you're caught in the open, unless you quickly break line of sight, whether ducking behind scenery, leaping to higher ground, or hiding in patches of long grass. It's here where *Fe* starts to come unstuck. Environments often seem built for form not function, with some platforms set at a height which seems just beyond Fe's leap, while others are just low enough that you'll be able to scramble up. It's rarely more than a minor nuisance, but discerning which is which under pressure isn't always easy, and if you're pressed up against the platform in question, Fe sometimes won't bother jumping at all, forcing you to try again. A scant few seconds to move out of range of an enemy's gaze can be the difference between life and death; the low-slung camera isn't always ideally positioned either.

It's not an awful lot better when it joins you in the sky. Combined with the speed with which Fe's glide kicks in after a jump, you'll regularly overshoot platforms or pickups. The jump button is a pain elsewhere, too, since it's used to scurry up trees in a jerky, stop-motion fashion that's delightful to watch at first but can prove irritating in practice. The number of taps required to reach the top differs depending on the height of the tree and where you grab hold of it, meaning it's all too easy to tap one time too many and immediately dive off, sometimes prompting a long climb to get back to where you were. It sours the game's outstanding set-piece: an exhilarating, exhausting climb which ends up evoking *Shadow Of The Colossus,* in bad ways as well as good.

Otherwise, *Fe*'s biggest problem is overfamiliarity. Its story, told obliquely through stone carvings and sporadic visions, touches upon well-worn themes of nature and our treatment of it. And though it's hardly developer Zoink's fault that its game has launched so close to the aforementioned *Ode*, the latter's unorthodox traversal trumps *Fe*'s more conventional powers. Even its string-soaked score feels customary. Still, even as the music labours to make us feel, it's hard not to be moved by the connections you make within *Fe*'s world – whether it's crooning to a bulbous flower that nods like a weary drunk until you rouse it with song, or witnessing the smallest creature in the forest finding a kindred spirit in the largest. It's a game that celebrates the idea of two disparate beings finding a shared language and using it to overcome their problems; in these troubled times, such moments are powerful indeed.

7

Developer Zoink Games
Publisher Electronic Arts
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Switch, Xbox One
Release Out now

It's a game that celebrates the idea of two disparate beings finding a shared language to overcome their problems



SECOND NATURE
Fe's post-game gives you a more peaceful world to explore, letting you enjoy the sights and sounds without the same pressures while you mop up everything you missed. By this time, most players will have unlocked the ability to trot around on all fours – though even running in an uninterrupted straight line you'll never reach Amaterasu-like speed. Another optional ability is less useful than it first seems, though it's a pleasure to use in certain areas: what we hoped would extend our flight time is instead more akin to a mid-air dash. This is triggered by swooping, with a double-tap causing Fe to briefly hover in place before zooming forward. But the need to descend first to pick up speed means it's only worth using from the tallest perches.



ABOVE Attracting the attention of your lanky opponents isn't always a bad idea. Bring them into the path of a charging stag and you'll feel like a first-year befriending the toughest kid in school to frighten his bullies







TOP In a palette dominated by blues, purples and oranges, green ironically seems like the most alien colour of all. These lilypads disappear once you've leapt off them; it's hard to miss the next, but an underwater threat lies in wait should you slip up.
MAIN Updrafts from these orange flowers will sustain your glide, though you'll need to call out every so often to keep them unfurled.
LEFT There's no HUD, though whenever you locate a power-up you're shown how many you need to unlock the next ability. It's a pity Zoink doesn't trust the player to do the obvious thing at key moments, offering rudimentary instructions that seem particularly intrusive in a game that says much without words

Dissidia Final Fantasy NT

Developer Team Ninja
Publisher Square Enix
Format PS4
Release Out now

Team Ninja's latest is a mechanically excellent 3v3 multiplayer arena fighting game, and nobody is playing it. We can't blame them: *Dissidia Final Fantasy NT*'s core is a spirited take on the genre, mantled in a mess of inadequate base content, poor presentation and technical issues. Yes, you can enjoy its lavish fan-service battles on a superficial level, but getting the most from *Dissidia NT* requires a significant time investment. Finding ways to meaningfully invest time in becoming a consistently great player is difficult: instead, we spend plenty of it pondering where it all went wrong as we wait, twiddling our thumbs, to be matchmade, eventually, with other players online.

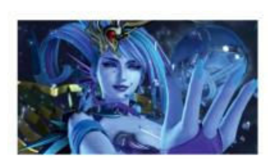
A console port of arcade game *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, it's easy to see why *Dissidia NT*'s singleplayer offering might be lacking, if harder to forgive it. The token tutorial gives scant information on the game's controls and unorthodox battle system. Each team of three players shares three stocks, or lives, between them – the first team to lose them all is defeated. Hitting X has your character perform Bravery attacks to build a meter: when it turns a glittering purple, you can fire off an HP attack that deals damage. Pre-selected EX Skills on triangle offer alternate attacks, party-wide buffs or enemy debuffs. The right bumper lets you dash after (or away from) the enemy team, until your stamina bar is depleted. Well-timed bumper presses also allow you to chain Bravery attacks into each other for longer combos. The left bumper is reserved for your guard, turning into a swift sidestep when combined with a directional input.

These are the basics, and a surface knowledge of them will get you through what *Dissidia NT* optimistically dubs Story mode, a series of short cutscenes that offer thin justification for why the *Final Fantasy* series' best and, predictably, bustiest are beating each other up. The Goddess Materia has summoned them against their will, in need of the raw energy they create through battling to save the realm – a premise that sounds mad enough without coming from a woman dressed in a sexy laundry basket. Largely non-interactive, it's a patchy disappointment that doesn't make the most of its rich roster. Most bafflingly, every cutscene is locked away behind Memoria, an in-game currency earned by participating in online and offline battles. The offline arcade mode is almost instantly wearying: the enemy AI swings between useless and cheaty, while your two companions never manage to crawl out from the former bracket and cost you the majority of your stocks. The preferable option is jumping straight into online play, with nary a practice mode or character move list in sight.

The results, unsurprisingly, are mixed. For the first few hours, *Dissidia NT* can seem impenetrable, as you fumble around with alien button configurations and get tossed about in mid-air like a spiky-haired frisbee between two Zidanes and a Cecil. Countless bars, meters and indicators litter the screen. Switching between targeting each of three enemies with the triggers feels like spinning a nauseating roulette wheel, as the camera veers wildly to locate a player somewhere in the chaos. Players zip through the air in 3D space: even if you're well-acquainted with the arcs that indicate who's targeting you, attacks can hit seemingly out of nowhere.

> You'll eventually uncover a singular, sophisticated addition to the genre underneath all the clutter

If you're clued in on fighting games, you'll eventually uncover a singular, sophisticated addition to the genre underneath all the clutter. Four character classes offer range and depth, and can be played in multiple ways thanks to *Dissidia NT*'s customisable EX Skills. Marksman fighters such as Terra and Y'Shtola make for great supports, peppering opponents from the backline with ranged shots to build bravery, then distributing meter amongst the team using a pre-selected Share Bravery EX Skill. Once we have a firmer grasp on timing their tricky attacks, they can be rebuilt to deal huge precision damage. Given that a balanced team composition is so crucial, it's unfortunate that you can't coordinate with strangers' picks, forced to pick a fighter before being matchmade online. Changing EX Skills to make up for weaknesses, however, is possible – providing you've unlocked a good range already.



ICE QUEEN
Love them or loathe them, *Dissidia NT*'s Summons can change the course of a match in an instant. Smashing cores that appear in the arenas fills your Summon bar: then, you can call upon your chosen guardian for help. The more teammates summoning, the faster it'll appear, although you're put at risk of attack. Bahamut fills your EX gauge faster, and explodes the enemy team with Megaflare; Ramuh rains down thunderbolts; Ifrit greatly enhances Bravery recovery speed. Shiva appears to be the most popular choice by far, picked in the majority of our matches, as she's able to stun and freeze enemies, which can help end a fight quickly.

If you're patient and experienced, there's always a way out of a sticky situation in *Dissidia NT*'s battles. Getting comboed against a wall can be frustrating, for instance, but observant teammates will see the opportunity to ambush your abuser, leading to some exciting bait-and-switch plays. What's more, if you're attacked by a follow-up Wall Rush combo, you're granted a brief window of invincibility during which to escape. And while we perhaps wouldn't expect a tutorial to spoil the more emergent tactical plays of *Dissidia NT*, a clue as to that invincibility aid would have been useful, as panicked rookies are liable to mash buttons and counteract its effect. All this assumes you find your way into an online match in good time, and are blessed with a lag-free round. We regularly wait upwards of five minutes as *Dissidia NT* casts about for somebody who still cares, and then often proceeds to struggle even on a wired connection, making blocks, combo timing and target-switching impossible.

Infuriatingly, *Dissidia NT*'s focus on 3v3, its limited modes and lack of beginner-friendly packaging means that, as the online well of competition runs dry, we're repeatedly matched with a single opponent with the remaining four slots filled by incompetent AI. Those of you solely targeting our bots for an easy win ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Really, though, the blame lies with *Dissidia NT*: struggling against its many issues only serves to sap everybody's energy, despite what that laundry-basket-case may insist.

5

ABOVE Fans of the original *Dissidia* games shouldn't expect RPG depth in *NT*. The gear game is gone in favour of balance: *NT* is poised to become an esport in Japan.
RIGHT Each fighter has their own unique trait (left unexplained by the game) that can help you master their playstyle. Sephiroth's dash-cancels, for instance, have zero startup animation, allowing for punishing and aggressive combos



BELOW One of the joys of *Dissidia NT* is seeing classic characters given matching high-definition makeovers. The mysterious Warrior Of Light is based on Amano's art for the original *Final Fantasy*





ABOVE Playing Kefka is particularly enjoyable: his ability to place fake summoning cores around the battlefield can infuriate opponents, though his hilariously campy running animation might help them laugh it off

Full Metal Furies

Developer/publisher Cellar Door Games
Format PC, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Co-op indie brawlers aren't hard to find: close your eyes and walk in any direction, and chances are you'll bump into one eventually. But *Full Metal Furies*, according to Cellar Door Games, is "an action RPG with a twist" – a prospect sure to make any *Rogue Legacy* fan salivate. Here's the real surprise: Cellar Door's attempt at the genre isn't a revelation. It's adept, encouraging tactical play and containing an RPG system that helps incentivise swinging hammers and taking names. The boisterous fun is undermined by a niggling disbelief, as we poke around in *Furies'* corners for a bit of brilliance. No such luck: it remains simply, stubbornly, a semi-decent brawler, and little more.

In fairness, the bar was set high. *Rogue Legacy*, Cellar Door's debut, was a delicious riff on the Roguelike genre. *Furies*, by comparison, is fairly by-the-numbers. You must save Athens from ruin by methodically bashing your way through hordes and Titan bosses, plus plenty of questionable gags (2011, we're told, would like its memes back).

At least the four playable characters are somewhat likeable, bouncily drawn and animated, tragically flattened into pixelated sprites in combat. Tanky shield-bearer Triss, acrobatic fighter Alex, Erin the tech-focused Engineer and near-sighted sniper Meg: each Fury serves a distinct purpose. In singleplayer, you're able to select two at a time, switching between them during fights to take advantage of their varying class-based talents. Each possesses a primary and secondary ability, an evasive manoeuvre and a special attack. Juggling them all presents a stern challenge, with one eye kept on the cooldowns ticking down, and another on hails of bullets being spewed towards you.

A successful assault on a horde of enemies is often achieved by cancelling regular or secondary abilities into powerful moves, or creating big-damage combos between characters. The latter is gratifying in solo play: it becomes second nature to use Triss' shield-smash to launch an enemy and follow up with her AOE shout to land a critical hit, or to press a button to tag in Meg and her special attack, sniping foes from the air in bullet-time. In co-op, however, team-based combos are harder to coordinate. The action is frenzied and reactive by nature, with everyone focused on simply staying alive.

Like *Rogue Legacy*, *Furies* can be unrelentingly tough. But while flexible fighting and varied upgrades equip players to face its most brutal tests, strange design decisions constantly thwart your progress. The game's revive system is particularly galling: should your other character or teammate fall, you can speed up their resuscitation by standing over them and holding a button. An evasive move can only do so much: for five seconds, the enemies surrounding you are free to clobber you, leaving you near death by the time your buddy is back on their feet.

In singleplayer, it's less of an issue. Your fallen character is granted a decent chunk of HP, their evasive manoeuvre likely off cooldown, helping give your poor, battered lifesaver a break. In multiplayer, however, a resurrected pal returns with a single point of HP: they are nearly-dead weight until auto-recovery eventually kicks in. Losing one teammate is often the beginning of the end in twoplayer sessions. Tank Triss becomes an indispensable pick, able to huddle behind her shield-block and revive in relative safety. Even in fourplayer co-op, where a Triss is guaranteed, anyone playing her inevitably ends up on babysitting duty.

It's an exasperating design, and a puzzling one given the developer's pedigree. *Rogue Legacy* took the Roguelike's punishing permadeath and transformed a 'game over' screen into something worth celebrating. By contrast, a death in *Furies* disrupts any rhythm its combat has helped to build. It's checkpointed generously, at least, and you keep all the gold earned in a level even if it's failed. But bumping up against a tough boss can become a grind as a result. One fight built for ranged firepower sees us mindlessly mashing through it until we earn the gold to unlock an upgrade for Meg that grants extra damage on consecutive hits. Afterwards, it's a cakewalk.

But there are also moments where *Furies* feels like a real battle, its victories hard-won. As you progress through the secret-filled world, you meet new foes: bombers that rain missiles; commanders dashing about with electrified swords; trombonists tooting enemy-buffing melodies; various types of mildly irritating turrets. Learning how to prioritise each, scraping past a level through careful positioning and timing, feels like an achievement – especially when altering your loadout to gain the edge over a certain enemy. Coloured bubble enemy shields that require specific characters of corresponding colour to break do force you to switch it up in singleplayer, or coordinate more effectively in multiplayer. Mind you, we could do without the white invincibility bubbles, which add artificial difficulty and empty seconds to encounters until they disappear.

In other words, the *Full Metal Furies* experience is as patchy in the hands as its attempts at humour. And we do use the term loosely. One minute, you're grinning at a boss' lengthy name spilling over its health bar, or a canny reminder that you can skip cutscenes; the next, you're gritting your teeth at a dreadfully played-out gag. You may rejoice at the way a last-second dodge or a flawlessly executed air crit feels, but you'll despair at the hurdles the game inexplicably builds in front of you. Worst of all, there's no mad twist of genius to be found anywhere. Yes, in the grand scheme of things, *Furies* is a fine co-op indie brawler – but if we were you, we'd open our eyes and keep on walking.

5

There are moments where Furies feels like a real battle, its victories hard-won



IT'S ALL GREEK
As the retro-homage style guide demands, there's no shortage of secrets to sniff out and puzzles to solve in *Full Metal Furies*. Early on, a special and permanent visitor to your camp will, when prompted, dish out cryptic clues for various hidden goodies. These range from cleverly disguised chests that require the use of a certain character to snag, to more complicated fare: rune stones that can be decoded to provide more clues to hidden objectives and secret Tetromino inputs. Only devout completionists will welcome the sight of yet another list of things to tick off.

RIGHT Overworld maps often contain esoteric secrets. One hidden here in the Ruins Of Thessaly requires Triss to find. MAIN Gold allows you to unlock blueprints scattered about the world. Equipment drastically alters characters' core abilities, and each has a mastery stat that builds up when you use it in battle. BOTTOM Level designs vary from arena brawls to bullet hell, and even combat-free setpieces such as this missile-dodging sprint









ABOVE Co-op is simple to set up, but it's local or invite-only with friends who also own the game, with no matchmaking system to speak of. Playing with a mate who's at a different level to you is common, and not much fun

The Inpatient

Wouldn't you know it, we've only gone and got amnesia again. The use of a classic horror cliché is perhaps appropriate: Supermassive Games' latest serves as a prequel to *Until Dawn*, the schlocky 2015 slasher that subverted contrivances with wicked glee. You'll find no such verve in *The Inpatient*, however. This is a lifeless VR horror that manages to make a monster-infested mental asylum boring.

The series' infamous Blackwood Sanatorium and its staff are in fine nick, all sumptuous '50s decor and craggy faces with glittering eyes. After a wheelchair ride through the facility you're thrown into a cell, where the majority of the game's first half is spent. Picking up sparkling objects flips scenes between reality, memory and the collapsing corridors of a surreal dreamscape. Cheap, but effective, jump scares provide welcome hits of adrenaline in lieu of any tangible atmosphere.

With the sanatorium outside supposedly descending into wendigo-related chaos, there's only your cellmate for company. Conversation is, in theory at least, a smart conceit: you can speak lines aloud, voice recognition technology and the headset's microphone determining which dialogue choice you're reading. Delivering a sarcastic retort and having it recognised provides the illusion of acting in a horror flick – but certain sentences won't play ball, even when we use a monotone pitch, and picking the alternative, working response out of sheer frustration becomes common.

Until Dawn's 'butterfly effect' choices return, key decisions leading to drastically altered chains of events. But nearly every pathway is riddled with plot holes. Any meaningful backstory *The Inpatient* attempts to give *Until Dawn* is lost in shoddy construction: our first run never reveals our cellmate's hidden identity, or gives us more than a vague idea of who *we* are.

A constant in every playthrough is the ineffably dull back half, which has you slowly following two fellow strandees through the bowels of the sanatorium. The sole glimmer of wasted potential is the VR-compatible return of *Until Dawn*'s 'Don't move!' mechanic in one scene: afterwards, it's back to sitting through thin exposition, or yawning at blackness for long stretches while listening to shootouts occur off-screen.

The cracks show frequently (the reuse of character models from Supermassive's recent Playlink release, *Hidden Agenda*, is particularly distracting). If there are ways to disguise the smaller team and budget required to make experimental fare viable, *The Inpatient* doesn't appear to employ any of them. It's yet another curiously half-hearted side project from Supermassive that, appropriately, won't linger long in the memory.

4

Developer Supermassive Games
Publisher SIE
Format PSVR
Release Out now



DUALSHOCK HORROR
The majority of players will attempt to play using the DualShock, as we did, and find themselves at a disadvantage. Every motion-controlled interaction with the pad is a struggle, your virtual wrist bending into sickening, useless shapes. In one late-game lift scene, the controller makes pressing buttons so impossible that a furious character leans over to do it for us. A brief spell with the Move wands proves a little easier – although *The Inpatient*'s extremely limited interactive elements hardly make a case for the purchase.

Sanatorium owner Jefferson Bragg is highly underused, appearing in the unsettling opening before going AWOL for most of the game. A late choice involving him is moot: thanks to *Until Dawn*, his fate is already sealed



Dandara

This is, conceptually at least, the modern indie game at its worst: *Game X* meets *Game Y*, with a twist. *Dandara* borrows its gear-gated 2D structure from the *Castlevania* and *Metroid* games of yore. It overlays *Dark Souls'* progression and checkpointing system, sparsely dotting the map with campsites at which your health, abilities and restorative items are recharged. Doing so respawns all the enemies you've dispatched – and you'll never guess, but when you die you drop your accrued currency on your corpse, and have one life to get it back. And the twist? The titular heroine can't run, or jump; she can only zip between two fixed points, the analogue stick lining up her destination, and a button press pinging her over there at speed.

As you might expect, it's the latter element that elevates *Dandara* from being a run-of-the-mill hybrid of established game styles to, well, a Blink-of-the-mill one. That you can only move between points of safe ground within a certain range gives the developers a degree of creative licence with *Dandara*'s level design; a low wall that even a toddler could mantle over can be, in effect, a cliff when you have no means of getting past it. It's an effective idea, and offers a novel way to traverse a world of otherwise familiar design. Early on, it elevates combat, too: the rank-and-file enemies would, in any other game, pose no threat, but the need to manage space, movement and direct your gunfire means that even easy battles can make for complex puzzles to solve.

Sadly things rather fall apart as the difficulty ramps up. *Dandara* is playable with touch or traditional controls, and to compensate for the latter's relative lack of speedy precision, the game gives you a wide margin of error, interpreting (or trying to) your intent and automatically picking the nearest available platform. When things get hectic and you're trying to manage your own movement between landing points that only seem to get smaller, something will have to give and you'll play by instinct – an instinct that can be misinterpreted, and prove fatal. It's especially irksome during boss battles, when the level around you starts to warp and shift and you've suddenly got no idea where to look. With touch controls, meanwhile, what you gain in speed is lost to the need to briefly occlude the action with your own hand.

It's during such moments that *Dandara* undermines its own inspirations, and the promising gentle thrill of its central idea. When you respawn miles away after a death in a *Souls* game, you feel a certain resolve to recoup your earnings. Here, you'll ask if it's really worth the bother. Miyazaki, Sakamoto and Igarashi, you suspect, would be resolutely unimpressed.

5

Publisher Raw Fury
Developer Long Hat House
Format iOS, PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



SOURCE CODE
Dandara was developed by Long Hat House, a four-person team based in Belo Horizonte, Brazil – and the game's story is deeply rooted in the crew's home nation. The titular hero was a legendary warrior in the 17th century, her fearsome capoeira skills seeing her lead the fight against Dutch invaders who imposed slavery on her people. Hardly the cheeriest of narrative setups, but the game keeps this inspiration, at least, at a Blink-enabled arm's length.

While the pixel-art biomes can be beautiful, the map certainly isn't. It's an absolute stinker, made even harder to read by a screen that often rotates when you enter a room, leaving you unsure which door you came in through





Dishonored

How Arkane granted players mastery of space and created a stealth masterpiece

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer Arkane Studios **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2012

From up there, crouched on the top of a signboard, the Dunwall street looks almost ordered. City Watch guards patrol up and down, and they have an alarm wired to a control box on a wall opposite. There's an open window across the way, perhaps leading into a house filled with valuables or an alternative route to your goal; at the end of the road lies the main gate that leads directly to it. Spying closer, there are grates you can use to pass through, if you can find a rat to possess. There's an underpass which might let you slip through without being seen; maybe that rooftop will offer another route.

But down there on the wet cobblestones, order has crumbled into chaos and nowhere is safe. The wide boulevard offers little cover; if the Watch guards see you they'll come after you with swords and pistols. The rats pooled by the grate will throw themselves at you ravenously if you wander too close. Along the underpass stagger plague-stricken weepers who will vomit and tear at you, and on that rooftop wait quiet, gas-masked assassins.

Yet you feel powerful because you're armed with knowledge of the streets. You can make choices and form strategies because you've seen what's ahead from on high, and you can always return there because in *Dishonored* you're not tied to the ground. Instead you exist in a liminal place between playing actor and observer, dancing between watching, probing, infiltrating, fighting and escaping as you find your way through a broken city that's opened up by the agility of our hero, Corvo Attano.

He's lithe and quick, but the most valuable of Attano's skills is supernatural. With Blink he can teleport to a nearby location, whether behind a guard or to a ledge above, in total silence and with a range that extends far beyond his jump. It gives the player a command over space which overcomes any loitering sentry, dead end or high wall, since you can always zip past or over. With Blink, Dunwall becomes yours, its twisting alleys, byways, roads and tunnels a network of possibilities, even though it's patrolled by so many dangers.

This sense of control marks *Dishonored* quite apart from the games that preceded it. As a direct member of a lineage that stretches back to *Ultima Underworld*, *Dishonored* fits neatly into the immersive sim genre, firstperson games inscribed with rich RPG-like systems which offer players a wide range of choice over how they play in them. From 1992's *Underworld* emerged *System Shock* and later *Deus Ex*, on which *Dishonored*'s creative director Harvey Smith was a designer.

But it's 1998's *Thief: The Dark Project* that *Dishonored* most closely resembles. The similarities go far deeper than their settings, which both combine European-esque history with fantasy, and steampunk technology with magic. In both games, you watch the world from places of safety, looking for opportunities. Stealth games are so often about observation leading to execution: the memorisation of a guard's patrol to find a precise window for when you can slip through the door they're posted to protect. But that process has many different shapes.

***Thief* is a** stealth game of light and shadow. Its pace is slow and steady, your positioning fixed on where it's dark, your speed restricted to your glacial silent crouch or noisy run, and so passage through its levels is methodical, taking each threat as it comes. Ghosting through *Thief* means rooting yourself to the shadows, at the mercy of the level designer. *Dishonored* locates its stealth in movement, and its pacing is up to you. You can creep quietly or run, or you can flit from place to place using Blink. Your movement through its levels is spasmodic and dynamic as you make an attempt at entry at one location before trying another. You feel your way through *Dishonored*, taking opportunities as they arise and adapting to mistakes, because your abilities allow for improvisation and you know you can always escape.

This pacing isn't all down to Blink. Attano's fluid run and jump are important, too, and so is his swift mantling of walls and fences, even if they're above his head, to stand steadily on their edge. For all his speed, his poise also gives you assurance in knowing he won't slip or tumble. And if you buy the second tier of his Agility enhancement, he'll gain a double-jump, giving even greater spatial access. ▶

This focus on movement makes *Dishonored* a much more action-based take on the immersive sim than its forebears. It invites acrobatic feats which test its systems, as a double-jump enables you to reach the pilot of a Tallboy stilt walker and assassinate him before Blinking away to cover, or Blink above a guard and drop-assassinate him, or chain together Blinks that take you across the entire level. And then there are the Bend Time skills, which slow or even stop time and, when combined with the Possession power, can lead to having guards shoot themselves: let them fire, stop time, possess them and walk them into their own bullet. Consider, too, rewiring environmental features such as Walls of Light, so they disintegrate your enemies, and then mix in a mine which chops its victims into pieces, grenades, guns and crossbows. And underpinning it all is Attano's blade. In the right hands, *Dishonored* is a playground of flowing bloody killing, all powered by pure agility.

While *Dishonored*'s Dunwall City Trials DLC supported that notion with a series of challenge maps that test freeform and creative killing, the core game doesn't seem to enjoy Attano's skillset so much. Corvo is many things. As the Royal Protector, sworn to keep his charge, Empress Jessamine Kaldwin, safe, he's an avenger. A thief, too, since in your attempt to find Jessamine's daughter and restore her to her throne, you'll ransack houses for money and runes that will buy upgrades. But you don't have to be a killer. While the story is hung around the assassination of leaders of the coup which led to the Empress' death, Attano has an uncomfortable relationship with murder.

Instead of a gauge to show how difficult you are to see, enemies clearly show their rising states of alertness as they catch sight of you. If you can get away in time you'll avoid raising the alarm

"You made someone a widow, damn you," a guard will bark if you kill one of his friends. *Dishonored* does a fair amount to humanise the City Watch, which will bear the most losses at your hands. The first time you see them in action, they're roughly throwing wrapped corpses from a bridge into the open top of a barge, but you'll realise the guards are just trying to maintain order in this plague-ridden city, even if they're working for its corrupt new leaders. After all, they used to work for Attano.

YOU'LL REALISE THE GUARDS ARE JUST TRYING TO MAINTAIN ORDER IN THIS PLAGUE-RIDDEN CITY

Dishonored's systems discourage killing, too. Like many other stealth games, it notes and rewards players who avoid letting anyone die, but more than that, the world itself changes as the Chaos level rises. Killing, leaving bodies unhidden and being seen all affect Chaos, and when it ticks towards its high state, guard populations rise, there are more rats and weepers, and the group of characters you're working with, the Loyalists, start to object to your actions. It even transforms the final level's nature.

Chaos is a kind of dynamic difficulty system. Since going lethal in *Dishonored* is generally rather easier than attempting to be stealthy, the additional guards and other threats helps to balance things. And on a thematic level, *Dishonored*'s harsh treatment



Not all Dunwall's residents are purely antagonists, such as Granny Rags, who gives you optional tasks to carry out



BUILD THE WALL

Dunwall's murk is presented in an almost painterly texture style. But it's riven with strange technologies and billboards for exotic products, brought to life with the use of light and shadow to pick out important features. Visual designer Viktor Antonov, who was art director on *Half-Life 2*, also brought with him a knack for creating cities which tell their histories through their architecture, but all these details would have little substance if they weren't reflected in *Dishonored*'s systems. They all give context for the factions who inhabit Dunwall: the City Watch are nearly at war with the Overseers. Aristocrats try to continue their lives above, the Bottle Street Gang runs below, and assassins and witches watch from the sidelines. Even with so many of its residents dead, Dunwall is surprisingly alive.



Enemies will block your attacks, so waiting for parries is the safest way to fight, if it comes to it. It's a system that demands you're in control of a situation: if you're surrounded, you're dead

of killing adds a new layer to the choices you make. At every turn you're reminded of the corrupt nature of the people you're opposing. Your first mark, High Overseer Thaddeus Campbell, is the head of a cult-like religion which mirrors its brutally uncompromising moral code in its fascistic monumental buildings. Less a church than a cruel bureaucracy, its abbey is filled with records of citizens' misdemeanours, and rather than pious, Campbell is a scheming liar, cruel torturer and licentious killer who brings prostitutes to his secret chamber and murders them if they attempt to disclose the truth. In other words, he's deserving of a serious comeuppance.

The simple way would be to murder him, but if you overhear certain conversations and read the notes and other clues you find carefully, you'll learn that there's another way of dealing with him: brand his face with a mark that shows he's a heretic and you can have him excommunicated. There's a non-lethal way of despatching each of Attano's key targets, each adding new challenges to the game and new story details, and they all call into question your own immediate desire to kill, whether for revenge or just convenience: a reminder not to stoop to your enemies' level.

On an emotional level, though, it feels like *Dishonored* is judging you for using the wonderful playset it's given you. It's as if it's realised just how strong Attano is, with the transformational power of his ability to move so freely and to know so much about the world, and must act to rein him in. This uneasy feeling underscores the full length of the game, but it also complements *Dishonored*'s general sickly tone. From above, it's a game of cause and effect, and to be down on the street is to experience how muddled morals can get when you're up close to them, when an alarm is blaring and a guard is lunging. How easy it is to behead him... In transporting you quickly between both these states, *Dishonored* exposes the profits and costs of your actions, and isn't afraid to have an opinion of them.

At least, that is, until you play The Knife Of Dunwall, a DLC addition in which you play as Daud, the killer of Empress Jessamine. This seasoned killer has few of Attano's qualms, none of his high-minded connection to the people. Dunwall is his city, and he knows his place is in its gutters. ■

Dishonored is structured as a series of discrete levels, but returning between them to your base, the Hound Pits Pub, helps make Dunwall feel more coherent





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A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Minecraft

Developer Mojang **Publisher** Mojang, Microsoft Studios **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Switch, Wii U, Xbox One **Release** 2009

Perhaps there's only so much you can do with a block of dirt. Boot up *Minecraft* today, nine years on from the open-world survival sandbox's public release, and little appears to have changed. Giant pixels of terrain – grassy plains, desert, swampland, tundra – stretch out into the distance, containing the occasional boxy tree or chicken. The UI is much the same as it's always been. You're still almost completely unguided, your purpose simple: to mine materials and craft new things with which to, well, mine more materials.

Yet over 75 million players still log into *Minecraft* once a month. Microsoft's 2014 acquisition of Markus 'Notch' Persson's creation and company has doubtless helped: on its watch, *Minecraft* has gone from indie sensation to cultural cornerstone. The Education Edition is used in classrooms to teach history, maths, geography and computer science. There's even the Telltale spin-off, *Story Mode*, although it only serves to prove that *Minecraft's* best adventures remain in-game, and mercifully unscripted, with friends.

An active multiplayer and modding community on PC has been the driving force behind the game's growth. Servers run custom versions of the game: there is Star Wars roleplay, Pokémon-battling, competitive parkour, and the Hunger Games modes that predate the battle-royale frenzy. It's a vast, self-sustaining network that has enabled a newly creative and social generation of players – and super-slick online entertainers.

In the hands of its audience, a purposefully basic and malleable sandbox has become something remarkable. Microsoft has taken pains to replicate this community-led appeal on console. It certainly meant well with the Better Together update, which allows players to play together regardless of their platform. What it neglected to mention was that it requires an install of a new version of *Minecraft* – based on the much-diminished mobile port. As such, carefully wired redstone base game creations are scrambled, and features like large biomes and coordinates missing. It's hardly the revelation we'd expected, but with work, it could be the key to *Minecraft's* console userbase experiencing what makes the PC scene so vibrant.

In any event, Mojang's steady influx of updates to the base game provide small, constant, welcome changes for everyone. Polar bears, llamas, dual-wielding, fresh decorative blocks, strange new enemies and architectural structures provide reasons for a curious 75 million to revisit each month. Then again, *Minecraft* players are a naturally curious bunch, and Mojang's game is still unparalleled in its potential for continuous creation and discovery, even without all the updates. It turns out you can do more with a block of dirt than you might think. ■

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